

High School 5

DOXO

HELLCAT OF THE
UNDERWORLD
TRAINING CAMP

ICHIEI
ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero

PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT









Tears streaked down Koneko's face as she muttered those words.

"...I want to..."
"Huh? What was that?"
"I want to be strong."
"I'm supposed to be a Rook...but I'm the weakest of us all... I hate being so useless..."

Akeno Himejima is depicted in a dynamic pose, wearing her signature white and black school uniform with a black tie and a dark skirt. Her long black hair is tied in a high ponytail with a red ribbon. She has a serious expression and is surrounded by bright yellow lightning bolts. The background shows a window with a view of greenery outside.

There was a strange hue to Akeno's aura, and her teary eyes radiated a cold, forlorn feeling.

"...I wanted to show Issei my dedication...by using this disgusting power in front of him... But now..."
She slowly raised her arms before her.
"I'll never forgive you."

High School DxD

HELLCAT OF THE UNDERWORLD TRAINING CAMP

5

ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAMA-ZERO


New York

Copyright



Volume 5

Ichiei Ishibumi

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Miyama-Zero

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HIGH SCHOOL DxD Vol. 5 MEKAI GASSHUKU NO HELLCAT

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Be a kind, strong Red Dragon Emperor.

Life.0

Summer break—the second vacation of my high school life was underway.

How are you all doing, everyone? At present, I can't move a muscle.

It was early morning, and I was still in bed. The prez and Asia rested on either side of me, gripping like a vise! They were both sound asleep! I couldn't think of anything more wonderful! There was no greater pleasure for a renowned pervert. However, something was creeping toward me underneath the cotton blanket!

It was that very thing that had roused me from unconsciousness. A uniquely soft and supple texture was brushing against my skin beneath the covers! It was too much!

The sensation had made its way up to my chest when I finally steeled myself and pulled back the blanket.

"Oh-ho. Good morning, Issei."

My eyes fell upon a beautiful young woman with long, silky black hair.

Akenooooo?!

Akeno Himejima. She was the third-year vice president of the Occult Research Club I belonged to. Not only was she my upperclassman at school, but also an elder sister figure. A series of unexpected developments a few days ago had led to her moving into my house.

Maybe it was because she usually wore her hair in a ponytail, but the fact that it was hanging loose over her shoulders now struck me as incredibly sexy!

She was wearing a *yukata* made of delicate, thin fabric that rubbed against my skin as she pulled herself toward me! At the same time, the gentle touch of

her feminine body assaulted my senses! Given how thin her outfit was, I could practically feel everything underneath it! Dammit! She was just so wonderfully soft!

And to top it off, her body heat was practically melting my brain!

Akeno brought her face to my neck and suddenly stopped moving.

“Here we are,” she cooed in a sweet, seductive voice as she held on to me tightly.

Whoa! Her luscious hair smelled so good. It was making my nostrils flare in ecstasy!

“Mwah.”

A sneak attack! A kiss on my neck! Hold on, a kiss?! Akenooooo?!

My pulse quickened, and my heart felt like it was going to burst as she clung tightly to me. Our bodies were melting together!

Akeno’s legs snaked between mine.

Sh-she’s embracing me! Whoa! Her thighs are so squishy and smooth!

Soft fingers slipped around my own. This was like one of those bed scenes between lovers in TV shows or manga!

Whoaaaaa!

Her fingertips traced the contours of my body. I was practically shuddering in anticipation!

“Issei, you have such a nice physique. Do I have Rias’s training to thank for that? Oh-ho, I never imagined a man’s skin could feel this good. Or is it just *your* body, I wonder? Issei, how does *my* body feel?” asked Akeno before softly blowing in my ear.

I couldn’t move! She was clearly enjoying immobilizing me with the incredible sensation of her feminine flesh!

“A-awesome! Your body is the best, Akeno!”

“Oh-ho, I’m glad to hear that. You can enjoy it as much as you like, you know? I’d *love* to get to know you better, Issei... But there’s only so much we can do,

what with your frightening master sleeping right beside you. Still, something is thrilling about walking on a knife's edge, don't you think?"

This girl was a total sadist! She'd come in the early hours of the morning in full sadist mode! In terms of eroticism, Akeno was miles above most others, and she'd captivated me with such suspense that I couldn't budge!

She lifted herself up a little and stared down at my face, her hair spilling over my head. Slowly, her face drew nearer to mine.

Hold on, is this...?

"I wish we could freeze time and live in this moment... It would be so romantic. But I suppose—"

The second before Akeno's lips could brush up against mine, a voice called, "Akeno. What are you doing? How long have you been in here?"

!!!

...I fearfully tilted my head to the side. My other elder sister figure was staring at Akeno and me with baleful eyes.

Prez, you're scaring me! Seriously, Rias, that's terrifying!

Akeno turned toward the other girl, as if trying to show off that she was holding my hand.

"It's *skinship*. I sneaked in here to start the day off with a wonderful morning together with my sweet little Issei. I was lonely sleeping by myself."

The prez's brow furrowed at that explanation! Believe me when I say she was seriously angry now!

"*"My Issei"? When did you become his master?"* she demanded softly. Her whole body was trembling!

"I'm not his master. I'm his upperclassman. Isn't it the responsibility of an upperclassman to look after their underclassmen?"

The prez's face moved terrifyingly close to Akeno's. Her voice was ripe with anger. "His upperclassman... I see. So that's your game. This room is practically my sanctuary—the only place where I can relax. Asia aside, I won't allow

anyone to trespass here! This room belongs to Issei and me!”

Hold on, since when was my room hers?!

Akeno let out a soft chuckle. “Oh dear. You’re a very possessive young lady, aren’t you now? Are you afraid I’ll take him from you?”

“...It looks like we’re going to need to discuss this again.”

A crimson aura enveloped the prez’s body!

Whoaaaaa! She’s not seriously going to battle in here, right?!

“My, that’s a rather belligerent energy for a discussion.” Akeno smiled, golden power emanating from her body.

What?! Her too?!

“Oh, it’s time for a talk, all right.”

The two of them stared each other down, their gazes practically giving off sparks...

Whoa, this isn’t going to turn into another battle, is it?! One more contest over who gets to keep me as their pet?!

I was happy they both liked me that much, but there was nothing more frightening than a brawl between Akeno and the prez! They were both usually so kind, but when they glared at each other with this level of ferocity, it made me want to shrink back in terror!

“...Nhh. Is it morning...already...?” Asia woke up on my other side, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“You can go back to sleep,” I replied, patting her on the head.

Ah, Asia. She was how I relaxed.

“Issei... I’ll do that, then... Just let me hug you...”

Half-unconscious, Asia latched on to me and began to nod off again! Ugh, she was so wonderfully cute, but this was hardly the time or place!

Pow! Slam! Thud!

I glanced in the direction of the sudden noise, only to find the prez and Akeno

engaged in a pillow fight!

My two lovely ladies, there's no need for this so early in the morning!

"I *hate* it when you try to touch my most prized possession, Akeno!" The prez hurled a cushion with tremendous force, hitting Akeno square in the face.

When it fell, Akeno was grinning. The blow hadn't bothered her at all. In fact, she seemed even happier than she had a second ago! "Oh? Just a little shouldn't hurt! You're so stingy, Rias!" She picked up the fallen pillow and smashed it into the prez's head! Man, what a mighty blow!

Rias pulled the pillow away. Her eyes were glistening with tears!

"I've just finished remodeling this house, Akeno! I won't let you get away with acting however you please!" All of the prez's usual sophistication and elegance were gone—now she was simply lashing out like an ordinary girl her age. She hurled the pillow back at Akeno!

This time, however, Akeno dodged and tossed another one of my cushions back. "Lord Sirzechs told us to live together as one big Familia!"

"This house belongs to Issei and me! You and my brother keep getting in the way! I've had enough!"

What incredibly moving words, Prez! I was so touched that I felt like crying! As her servant, I hadn't done anything to earn this! Yet even I couldn't deny that the prez was acting like a selfish, spoiled young lady right now!

"Are you saying you're content to ignore Lord Sirzechs's instructions?! Are you more dedicated to Issei than you are to the Demon King?! Let me borrow him already, just for a little while!"

"No! Absolutely not!"

Their power was frightening, but the prez and Akeno bickered like any other pair of girls.

Ever since they'd started living with me, I felt like they'd begun to reveal their true selves more and more.

At school, they were so refined—noble even. There was a reason people called them the Two Great Ladies. Everyone admired them. / admired them.

The truth of it was that they were still high school girls, though. I wasn't shocked to see them behave this way. No, I was happy. It was all well and good to have a dignified demeanor, but I found it very cute when the two were more honest. In fact, I probably liked this side of them even more.

Wait a second, I thought, finally processing what the prez had just said. *Did she say she'd recently finished renovating the house?*

As I thought about it, I realized that the bed did seem somewhat larger than I remembered. I mean, there was more than enough room for Rias and Akeno to hurl pillows at each other without pushing Asia and me to the floor.

Huuuuuh?! Since when was my mattress so big?! Even with four people on it, there was still plenty of room! Looking up, I realized it even had a canopy!

The changes didn't stop at the bed, either. The whole room was way more spacious than it had ever been!

Huh?! How?!

My teeny room wasn't even large enough to fit eight tatami mats in it! Yet now it looked like it was at least twice that size!

Not only that, but my old CRT TV had been replaced with a monster flat-panel LCD screen that was connected to all the latest video game consoles! There was no way I would have been able to afford all that from my allowance and what I earned doing my part-time job!

I dashed outside into the corridor! This wasn't right! Everything had been normal when I had gone to bed last night!

The hall was double the width I remembered! New sets of stairs led both up and down! My bedroom had been on the second floor of a two-story building! Were there three now?!

However, when I peered up the steps, I realized that they didn't even end at a third level!

I flew down the stairs and charged out the now-grandiose entranceway!

Catching my breath, I beheld the building's exterior...

This doesn't make any sense! Is this still my home?!

It looked like the work of a master architect!

“Wh-whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

My cries echoed through the neighborhood.

The plot of land my family’s residence stood on had doubled in scope, and the edifice atop it rose six stories high.

Life.1

Summer Break! Off to the Underworld!

“Ah, so it’s been renovated. I almost had a heart attack when I woke up this morning. Who would have thought you could overhaul a house overnight while everyone was sleeping?” my dad said over breakfast.

He and I were sitting at the dining table, which was at least five times larger than it had been the day before. With us were the newest members of our family: Rias, Asia, Akeno, and Xenovia.

As we all ate, I turned to my dad and demanded, “What’s going on?”

At that moment, my mom brought in a tray loaded with bowls of miso soup from the kitchen. It, too, had quintupled in size.

“Rias’s father said he works in the construction industry, and he offered to remodel the place free of charge as part of a demonstration campaign,” she explained.

There’s no way anyone would do this for free! Or so I’d thought. Knowing that the prez’s parents were behind it did make it all easier to swallow.

Rias herself was sitting silently at my side, calmly eating her breakfast. She already knew about all this.

Hold on. This is more than mere renovation. The plot of land’s area had increased. What had happened to our neighbors...?

“Speaking of which, I heard that the Suzuki family and the Tamura family next door decided to move out. They apparently found some nicer homes on short notice,” my dad remarked.

That was undoubtedly the prez’s family’s doing! There was no doubt about it!

“Don’t worry. It was a peaceful arrangement. Everyone is happy,” Rias whispered with a wide grin.

Had my neighbors fallen prey to a demonic negotiation technique?! If Rias said things were okay, then I trusted her. Still, the House of Gremory was a force to be reckoned with!

My mom unrolled a floor plan of the house.

“We have the living room, kitchen, and a Japanese-style room on the first floor. The second floor has Issei’s, Rias’s, and Asia’s rooms. Theirs are adjacent to Issei’s, see? They both have an extra set of doors so you can enter his room without having to go through the corridor.”

The prez had made the entire second floor her territory. Reading over the blueprints, I realized that my room was quadruple its original size. Had Rias’s family brought in all that new furniture, too? It was incredible. There was a huge TV that I had never seen before sitting in the living room, and a chandelier was hanging from the ceiling...

“Your father’s and my bedroom is on the third floor, along with a study and a storage space,” my mom continued. “Akeno’s and Xenovia’s rooms are on the fourth level. There’s also a spot set aside for Koneko, who should be moving in with us soon.”

My gaze met Akeno’s. She flashed me a grin. For some reason, it looked more genuine to me than her usual cheerful expressions... She’d been smiling my way a lot recently.

I was still getting used to seeing her beam like that. While it was difficult to explain, I felt like this was her being more open and authentic with me. She had a much gentler atmosphere about her than she had before. Perhaps we were growing closer somehow.

Don’t get me wrong, Akeno was still a beauty beyond my humble station, but she didn’t appear so far from reach anymore...

Before I knew it, my heart had started pounding. The prez pulled my cheek. Ow. She was getting rougher by the day. It wasn’t like I had any intention of serving anyone but her. She worried too much.

My mom’s explanation of our new house went on. “The fifth and sixth floors are vacant right now. Rias said she didn’t mind what we did with anything,

excluding the second floor. So we can keep them as guest rooms for now.”

“That’s right. This house belongs to you, Issei’s parents, after all. Asia and I, and the others, too, are ultimately just here on homestay,” the prez responded with grace.

Huh?! I definitely remember her saying this house belonged to her a little while ago! What’s with the sudden change in attitude?!

“There’s also an open-air garden on the roof. Your father will be growing his own vegetables!” my dad declared with a twinkle in his eyes.

Ugh, he was okay with all of this ridiculousness so long as he got his dream home out of it! The allure of an incredible property had seduced him!

“The construction is very solid, enough to survive a war,” stated Rias.

“Ha-ha-ha, I like your sense of humor,” my dad responded.

I was sure that hadn’t been a joke. This building *would* be able to survive a full-scale battle.

Please don’t tell me it has cannons or something hidden away somewhere...

What had my dad and Rias’s father talked about when they’d met during Open House at school? Wondering made my stomach churn with anxiety.

They’d better not be planning to sell me off to the underworld!

That was unlikely, but I couldn’t shake the notion that my parents’ attitude toward me and the others had changed since that meeting.

“I heard there’s a basement as well,” Xenovia appended, struggling with her chopsticks.

“A basement?!” I cried out in shock.

The prez nodded. “Yes. Three of them, actually.”

So this house had another three whole stories underground?!

The prez pulled out another set of floor plans as she explained. “The first subterranean floor is a large hall. We could use it as a training room, or even for something like a movie night. There’s a large bathroom in there, too. The second basement level has a big indoor pool. I suppose it could also double as a

spa. The last floor is for storage and keeping books, that sort of thing.”

My home even had an indoor pool now. And would you believe that wasn't even the end of the surprises?

“We've installed an elevator, too, so you can easily travel to any level in the building,” said Rias.

Yep, a full-on elevator. This place was practically a city building now. I was speechless.

Thus, only days into summer vacation, my modest home had become a palatial estate.

“You're going back to the underworld?!”

The prez nodded at my question.

After breakfast, the members of the Occult Research Club had all gathered in my room.

Kiba, Koneko, and Gasper had arrived only a few minutes ago.

Everyone was wearing regular clothes instead of our school's uniform. Koneko's dress was particularly adorable.

Although the whole club gathered in one spot, there was still plenty of room to go around. We all took seats on the expensive-looking sofas.

The only exception was Gasper, who'd crept into his cardboard box... He was wearing women's clothes, too! I should have expected as much. Cross-dressing was a hobby of his.

Rias smiled warmly. “It's summer break, so I'm going to visit my family. I do this every year. Oh? What's wrong, Issei? Is that a tear I see?”

It was true. I was crying at this news!

“Ugh, when you said you were going home all of a sudden, I thought you were going to leave me behind or something...”

I couldn't stand the thought of the prez disappearing somewhere without me! Just imagining her breasts traveling far away filled me with such melancholy that it would end up spoiling the entire summer break! I couldn't picture life

without Rias anymore!

“Come on now, how could you think that? You and I will spend the next hundred—the next thousand—years together, so don’t you worry. I won’t leave you behind,” she assured.

Right, we were demons, after all. We lived longer lives than humans. Did that mean the prez and I, and the other members of her Familia, were going to be together forever? When I thought about it like that, I didn’t feel so lonely.

I would probably spend more time with them than with Matsuda and Motohama, or even my parents. Admittedly, that was sad in its own right, too. I would have to say farewell to them all one day...

“Anyway, we’ll all be taking a trip to the underworld soon. Do get ready for an extended stay,” the prez stated with a graceful sip of her tea.

Hold on. We’re all going?!

“What?! We’re coming?!”

“That’s right. You’re all my servants, my Familia, so it’s only natural that you’ll be accompanying me. We’ll visit my hometown. Hmm, this will be the first time Asia and Xenovia have ever been to the underworld, won’t it?”

Asia nodded. “Y-yes! I’m a little nervous about traveling there while still alive! I—I only thought I’d go there after I died!”

Asia! What was that supposed to mean?!

“Yeah. I’ve always been interested in the underworld—in Hell. I dedicated myself to the Lord so that I could go to Heaven, but now... So long as I’m a demon, any chance of that has gone up in smoke... It’s ironic, really. I’ll be visiting the place I condemned so many to. Hell... It *does* sound like a good fit for a former believer who ended up becoming a demon.” Xenovia looked like she was sinking deep into an overcomplicated train of thought again.

“We’ll be spending the rest of summer break there, until the twentieth of August. We’ll be doing a lot of training on this trip.” As if to provide evidence for that claim, the prez began to outline our schedule.

Right, so we would be gone until school started back up. I’d visited the

underworld briefly when I'd fought Riser Phenex, but apart from the fact that the sky was purple, I hadn't gathered much information.

From what I'd heard in passing, it sounded like the souls of the dead went there and that one could find many business opportunities in the underworld.

Unfortunately, spending all our time off from school there did ruin my own arrangements for the break.

"Um, well, I've already made some plans for things I want to do..." I blurted out.

Matsuda, Motohama, and I had all sworn to get girlfriends and have a dirty, erotic summer.

Our strategy was to visit the beach and various pools to pick up girls! All three of us were still single. Heck, the only girlfriend I'd ever had murdered me...

This summer was supposed to be different!

"Oh? Issei, what plans exactly?" the prez asked skeptically.

"Right. Well, I was going to go to the beach, or a pool, you know..."

"There are no beaches in the underworld, but there is a large lake. There are hot springs there, too. And if you want to swim in a pool, you have one here at home now. Won't any of those do?"

Going to the pool here and a lake in the underworld with Rias had to be ten—no, a hundred!—times more enjoyable than traveling to the beach with Matsuda and Motohama! And that wasn't even counting a hot spring!

My mind filled with fantasies of the prez, naked! Akeno, Asia, Xenovia, and Koneko, too! A feast of feminine flesh!

M-maybe I can give them oil massages, or peek in on them in the hot spring... We might even do mixed bathing!

I wanted to fondle Rias's breasts, and Akeno's, too! To take a handful of both of them and squeeze and rub them down!

"...Obscene fantasies are forbidden," Koneko murmured with narrowed eyes.

Koneko! So you can read my mind!

No sooner had she voiced her edict than she let out a deep sigh and stared off into the distance.

Huh? After considering it, I realized that her interjection seemed less forceful than usual.

“Issei, your expression just now was even lewder than I had imagined,” Kiba declared in his typical calm voice.

“You look like you’re enjoying yourself, Issei... I wish I had an imagination like yours...,” Gasper admitted, as if genuinely envious of my perverted visions.

“Aren’t you two going on any dates this summer?” I asked.

Admittedly, they were both better looking than I was. They could enjoy the season to the fullest if they put their minds to it!

“I have training to do.”

Damn, if Kiba wasn’t Mr. Diligent! Seriously, he was only losing out by not putting those pretty-boy looks of his to proper use!

“I’m fine... I-I’m a shut-in and an introvert... I just want to wear cute clothes while surfing the net at home...”

That accursed cross-dressing sociophobe! When was Gasper going to take the bull by the horns and do something to benefit himself?!

“In that case, Issei, why don’t we go on a date together in the underworld? Assuming we have time, of course...,” the prez suddenly proposed.

Whoa! As her servant, I was overjoyed! She really did love to spoil me!

“Prezzzzz! I’ll gladly spend all summer in the underworld with you! A hundred percent, I’m in!” The words had left my mouth before I knew what was happening.

“Oh dear. In that case, I’ll have to spend my time with Issei in the bedroom, doing all sorts of naughty things that we won’t be able to tell the president about,” Akeno said, suggestively tracing the area around her chest with the tip of her finger!

Blood gushed out my nose at these stimulating words! Akeno was so erotic!

For an elder sister figure, she was naughty! What exactly was she planning to do to me?!

“No.”

“You can’t stop me.”

Rias and Akeno locked eyes, and the air between them crackled! Whoaaaaa! Were we about to see a continuation of the battle from this morning? What was the point in fighting over the affections of their underclassman like this?!

“I’ll be joining you all.”

“?!”

Without anyone realizing it, a handsome black-haired man had appeared on a seat in the corner of the room. It was Azazel.

We were all taken aback by his unexpected entrance.

As the leader of the fallen angels, he had been present at the peace summit held between his group, ours, and the forces of Heaven the other day. For some reason, he had chosen to remain in town after everything had been settled and had taken a position at Kuou Academy as a teacher. On top of that, he had also become the Occult Research Club’s official adviser. Such a development would have been unthinkable only a few weeks ago.

Where had he even come from? I hadn’t felt his presence at all! Truthfully, I wasn’t exceptionally skilled in that area, but the prez or Kiba should have noticed him, right?

Well, given that Azazel was the leader of the fallen angels, it was probably to be expected that he had boss-level abilities. That made it all the more incredible that he was on our side.

“H-how did you get in here?” the prez asked, blinking in astonishment.

“Huh? Through the front door,” he answered plainly.

“...I didn’t sense you at all,” Kiba admitted.

So I had been right—even Kiba, having unlocked his ultimate ability, his Balance Breaker, hadn’t detected our adviser.

“That’s because you all need to brush up your skills. You lack training. I just strode in, cool as you like. You’re all going to the underworld, right? Then I’m coming, too. I am your *teacher*, after all.”

That much was true. Azazel had a wealth of knowledge about Sacred Gears and combat that would prove invaluable for us.

We hadn’t learned a great deal from him yet, but from what I could tell, each of us in Rias’s Familia equipped with Sacred Gears had been able to improve thanks to his advice. There was no denying that he was an excellent instructor in addition to being a great and powerful leader.

Azazel pulled a notepad out from his pocket and began to read off it. “Let’s see... Our schedule starts at Rias’s place, where she’ll introduce the new members of her Familia. Then there’s a get-together to hold the formal debuts of all the latest demons to come of age. And then your training. That’ll be my job. Maybe I’ll also have a chat with Sirzechs and some other bigwigs while we’re at the Gremory place. What a pain in the ass.” He let out a resigned sigh, as if he truly wasn’t looking forward to the prospect.

That didn’t seem to be the right attitude for the head of the fallen angels to have, and it only made the near-total support the man received from his subordinates seem all the more unbelievable.

Occasionally, some nameless fallen angel would appear before Azazel, begging to serve as his secretary, care for him while he was staying in the human realm, or guard him during his time here. It looked to me like they were all legitimately concerned whether he would be all right in our town. Some of those fallen angels had been of notably high rank, as well.

Yet every time, Azazel had replied, “I’m fine, so go home. That’s an order,” before dismissing them. We were blessed to have this man as our teacher.

All right, this trip’s a great chance to catch up to that jackass Vali!

If I fought the White Dragon Emperor now, I’d get destroyed. I didn’t want to die until I’d had some sexy time with the prez and Akeno!

“In that case, Azazel—*Mr. Azazel*, I guess—will you come with us? You won’t mind if we make all the arrangements for you?” the prez asked.

Our teacher nodded. “Ah, go ahead. This will be my first time heading to the underworld the way you demons go. I’m looking forward to it. I’ve always taken the fallen angel route.”

That prompted me to wonder how we were actually going to make the journey. Would we be taking a magic circle? I knew the realm was divided into demon and fallen angel territory. However, now that the two sides were at peace, it sounded like the barriers between them were being removed, and people from either faction were starting to interact with one another...

Maybe I was still too ignorant, but I couldn’t picture that at all.

I sent a text message to Matsuda and Motohama. I’LL HAVE TO PASS ON GOING TO THE BEACH THIS TIME! I’M GOING ON A HOT SPRING TRIP WITH PREZ AND THE OTHERS!

Their replies were instantaneous.

DIE!

GO TO HELL!

Yep, Hell was where I was going. Well, the underworld, technically. If only my friends knew it was better than they thought!



On the day we set off for the underworld, our first destination was—the local train station. We were all wearing our Kuou Academy summer uniforms. According to the prez, these would be considered our most appropriate formal clothes where we were going.

I’d used this station countless times. How was it going to take us to the underworld?

There was no end to my questions, but neither Rias nor Akeno showed any hesitation as they continued toward a nearby elevator that conveyed you to the platforms above.

From memory, it was a fairly narrow elevator, only really capable of holding five people at most.

The prez entered first, and Akeno quickly joined her. “Issei, Asia, Xenovia, now it’s your turn. We’ll be going down from here,” she instructed.

“G-going down?” I couldn’t help but raise my eyebrow at these words. After all, this elevator only went up.

“Come now, stop gawking and step inside.” Rias chuckled, beckoning us to join her.

We, the newest members of her Familia, exchanged puzzled glances but did as we were told.

“Yuuto, you and the others know what to do, so come down after us with Azazel.”

“Yes, President,” Kiba answered as the elevator doors slid shut.

With all our luggage, the elevator was getting quite cramped. I still had a clear line of sight to the buttons, though, and all of them were for the floor we were already on, or the one above. Nevertheless, the prez pulled a keycard-like object from her pocket and waved it over the panel.

Beep.

An electronic sound issued from behind the console, and then...

Thump.

With a sudden jolt, we started moving downward!

Huh?! It’s really descending?!

Neither Asia nor I could hide our surprise! Xenovia merely tilted her head in mild bewilderment. The prez and Akeno, on the other hand, exchanged amused grins when they saw how shocked Asia and I were.

“There’s a secret basement level under the station,” Rias said.

“Prez, I’ve lived in this town my whole life, and this is the first I’ve ever heard of that!” I exclaimed.

“Naturally. It’s for the exclusive use of demons like us. Ordinary humans aren’t able to access it. There are quite a few hidden areas like this in my territory.”

Evidently, there were still a lot of things I didn’t know about my hometown. How deeply were demons integrated into things?

The elevator continued for around a minute before coming to a stop.

When the doors opened, the prez urged us to exit.

Before us was a huge chamber, like a massive underground cavern!

It was built like a train platform. There were a few subtle differences in design from those in the human world, but the resemblance was so close, it was unnerving. There was even a set of tracks! Could it actually be a station?

A short wait later, Kiba and the others arrived.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s go to platform three,” Rias stated, leading the way with Akeno by her side.

Wow... I marveled at the sheer size of this place. It easily dwarfed the regular building above it. The ceiling was high enough that I’m sure my voice would have echoed had I shouted.

Curiously, no one else was around. The lights on the walls gave off a mysterious, magic-like glow.

Akeno suddenly sidled up to me, and the next thing I knew, she was holding my hand! Did she expect us to walk together like that?! Despite the surprising development, I managed to summon the courage to squeeze her hand back, as I often did with Asia.

“...”

That was all I did, but Akeno’s face flushed bright red in apparent joy! Faced with such a purehearted reaction, I didn’t know what to do with myself! She could be so erotic and sensual at times, but there was also an incredibly innocent side to her. That contrast only made Akeno all the more stimulating!

“...”

“...Sniff.”

Ugh, both Rias and Asia were glaring at me... Asia looked on the verge of tears.

I’m sorry...

After passing through a winding corridor, we made our way to another large,

empty space.

Wha—?! Whoaaaaa! A train was waiting for us. Well, I say “train,” but it possessed some distinct differences from the usual kind.

It was composed entirely of harsh angles and sharp edges, with demonic patterns engraved into seemingly every surface. I recognized one of them as the insignia of Rias’s Familia! Sirzechs’s was there, too!

Does that mean—?

“This train belongs to the House of Gremory,” the prez declared proudly, finishing my thought for me.

Amazing. So her family even has its own private train...

As I stood there, amazed, the automatic doors slid open with a swooshing sound. The prez led us in.

Once more, I was forced to recognize the wealth and power of my master’s family, but this was only the beginning.

Beeeeeeeeeeep!

An electric departure whistle sounded as the train took off.

The prez was in the lead carriage while we, the members of her Familia, were supposed to ride in the car behind her. It was a surprisingly strict rule.

I was sitting next to Asia, while Xenovia and Akeno sat directly across from us.

Koneko, Gasper, and Kiba were in the booth across the aisle. In the corner of their group was Azazel. He’d already fallen sound asleep.

The train chugged along for a few minutes. All I could see out the window was pitch darkness, but it hadn’t felt like we’d turned. We must have been on a straight course to the underworld. Supposedly, this locomotive was powered by a unique form of fuel that couldn’t be found in the human realm. There were many things about demon society that I had yet to learn.

“How long does it take to get to the underworld?” I asked Akeno.

“We should arrive in around an hour. This train is designed to pass through the dimensional barrier following formal procedures, you see.”

“I thought we could just use a magic circle to jump straight there.”

“Normally, that would be fine. But if new Familia members like yourselves don’t enter through an official port of entry for your first time, it’s counted as illegal entry, which means punishment. You and the others need to travel this way.”

“Huh?! Seriously?! But I already used a magic circle to jump to the prez’s engagement party!”

Grayfia had given me a special array that had sent me straight to Rias’s wedding with Riser.

Had that made me an underworld criminal?! I didn’t want to have to face the noose immediately upon arrival!

Akeno smiled back at me to dismiss my concerns. “That was ultimately Lord Sirzechs’s doing. It was excused as a special case. Of course, you had better not try anything like that again.”

“O-oh... I don’t want to be sent to demon jail...”

At least that was a slight relief. I may have been a demon, but I wasn’t at all familiar with all the underworld’s rules. Heck, I knew even less than Asia and Xenovia. Frankly, it was incredible that I’d survived this long.

“Your illegal entry should be overlooked, but you may have to face punishment for engaging in affectionate contact with your master,” Akeno continued.

“What?!”

If that was true, then I was in serious trouble! I mean, I had felt her body more than a fair amount.

Not only had I groped the prez’s breasts on several occasions, but I’d stroked her thighs, too! What’s more, I’d touched her damn near everywhere when I’d given her that oil massage at the start of summer break!

Ah, this was bad. Just thinking back on all those experiences was titillating. Rias’s body was so soft and smooth, her skin so supple to the touch...

As a fantasy began to play in the back of my mind, something fell onto my lap.

Akeno?!

She brought her face close to mine, her erotic gaze sucking me in! Then she took my hand. “There’s nothing wrong with two members of the same Familia getting closer through the use of *skinship*. Like this...”

Without hesitation, she began to guide my fingers down to her thighs! Whoaaaaaaa! The rich suppleness of her legs was consuming my brain! My nose began to spurt blood!

Next, she led my hand under her skirt! *A-Akeno, that’s forbidden territory!* I swallowed in trepidation. At this rate, I would end up at her panties! Was she really okay with that?!

Yet before I arrived at that holiest of places, Asia reached out to pull me away.

She was pouting, and her eyes were wet. “Akeno’s hold over you is too strong, Issei. She’ll turn you into a pervert...”

“Oh dear. Don’t you know? Asia, it’s healthy for a man to have a sexual appetite.”

I guess they’d already decided I was some kind of lecher. Still, if it meant I could touch Akeno’s body, I didn’t mind being called names!

Hold on, I thought. *This is usually when Koneko pops in with a biting remark.* I glanced at her, but she was simply staring vacantly out the window. Was she really ignoring all this commotion?! That wasn’t like her. She didn’t look interested in talking to Gasper, who was beside her, either.



“Well said, Asia. *Skinship* is something that should be kept between masters and servants.”

That voice...

I spun around. There, surrounded in an ominous crimson glow, was Rias Gremory. She was seething, seriously pissed! What was she doing here?! Wasn't she supposed to be riding in the front carriage?!

P-Prez!

This wasn't good! Akeno was straddling my lap with a lewd expression on her face! And my hand was a hair's distance from the inside of her skirt!

I tried to pull my hand back—but Akeno stopped me and pulled it to her mouth!

Schlick.

With a sensual, watery sound, my middle finger went right in! The touch of the inside of a girl's mouth melted my brain! It was so warm and wet, and her tongue was wrapping around my finger! Not only that, but she was sucking on it! It felt like she was draining all kinds of energies out of me!

When finally Akeno pulled my finger out of her mouth, a sensual string of saliva connected me to her!

“Stealing from my master makes me burn with desire.” Her gaze provocative, she smiled up at the prez!

W-wah! Her level of sensuality was downright terrifying!

“A-Akeno, that's enough—”

“Lady Rias. It's all well and good to communicate with your servants, but might I ask you to follow the proper procedures?”

A figure I hadn't seen before appeared behind the prez, interrupting her—an elderly man wearing a conductor's outfit and with a white dandyish beard. Hold on, did that make him the conductor?

“I-I'm sorry...”

“Oh-ho-ho. To think the little princess is now talking about relationships

between men and women. I've lived a long time, haven't I?" The man chuckled in amusement.

The prez's face turned bright red.

At that moment, the conductor turned to the rest of us, removing his cap and bowing his head. "Greetings. It's a pleasure to meet the newest members of the princess's Familia. I am Reynald, the conductor of the Gremorys' private train."

We each rose to our feet, bowing politely in return.

"I-it's nice to meet you, too! I'm Issei Hyoudou, the prez's—Rias Gremory's Pawn!"

"Asia Argento, her Bishop! Pleased to meet you!"

"Xenovia. I'm a Knight. All the best."

All three of us newest members of the prez's Familia greeted Reynald in turn.

Akeno soon returned to her original seat, looking a little disappointed. These erotic attacks of hers were unbelievable! I hadn't been able to move at all! Was I going to lose my virginity while unawares?! Our Queen sure could slay! And the fact that she acted like an innocent maiden occasionally only added to her allure!

With introductions out of the way, Reynald pulled out some specialist equipment and what looked like a monitor.

"U-um...?"

Asia, Xenovia, and I were perplexed by this development. The prez and Akeno seemed to know what was going on, though.

"We use this device in the demon world to confirm your identities. All vehicles entering through formal channels, as we are, require inspection. Forged identities and fraudulent entries are grave offenses. And these days, you can't be too careful when it comes to preventing hijackings."

Ah. So Reynald was simply checking to see that we were who we said we were.

The prez flashed us a mischievous grin. "You were all registered in the system

when I gave you your Evil Pieces to reincarnate you. This machine checks you against that data. You don't need to worry. You're all who you're supposed to be."

So she said, but the device began beeping loudly the second it came near me. It wasn't saying that I was an imposter or anything, was it? Right when I was starting to fret, it let out a light tone, indicating that I had passed the test.

"Entry procedures have been completed. The identities of your new Familia members have all been confirmed, Lady Rias. You can relax now until we arrive at our destination. We have beds in the sleeping carriage and a dining hall for meals, so please do make use of all the facilities before we arrive," Reynald said with a pleasant smile.

Oh, so that's all there is to it? That device was pretty neat.

"Thank you, Reynald. The only person left is Azazel, no?" the prez asked, glancing toward our club adviser—who was still sound asleep.

"...How can he doze off in a carriage filled with people who were his mortal enemies just a short time ago?" Rias wondered aloud, dumbfounded.

"Oh-ho-ho, the governor of the fallen angels looks like he's at peace." Reynald chuckled.

It was anyone's guess whether Azazel was courageous or just downright reckless, but he sure wasn't fazed.

While he slept, we all completed the necessary formal procedures before we arrived in the underworld.



We were around forty minutes into our train journey, passing the time by playing cards and the like, when Reynald made an announcement over the speaker system. *"We will soon be passing through the dimensional barrier. We will soon be passing through the dimensional barrier."*

Typically, a high-class demon master was supposed to stay in the front carriage, but the prez must have been lonely sitting by herself, because she had decided to remain with us.

"Take a look outside," she said to me, Asia, and Xenovia.

We glanced out the window as instructed. The scenery changed from pitch darkness to vibrant color!

Whoa! A purple sky! And—

“Mountains! And trees! Ha-ha-ha! Wow! Awesome!” I cried out in exhilaration.

“It’s beautiful! Incredible!” Asia, sitting by my side, exclaimed.

I knew exactly what she meant! This trip was going to be amazing!

There was a whole world of fresh new sights just waiting to be discovered!

“You can open the window now.”

With the prez’s permission, I did just that, and a gust of wind blew in! I had breathed the air of the underworld the last time I had come here, but only now did I realize how it felt somehow different from that of the human realm. There was a peculiar, almost slimy texture to it! The temperature felt just right outside, neither too cold nor too hot.

Beyond the window, the train seemed to be emerging out of what looked like a black hole floating in the air.

Is that the dimensional barrier? A tunnel between planes of existence? I wondered. Whatever it was, that was what connected this world to the human one, and it was from that which we emerged. We were in the underworld!

From my seat, I took in the view. There were peaks, rivers, and trees growing in abundance—a forest!

Ah! And a town! Houses! They were built in unique designs and shapes, but I supposed that was what demon homes looked like.

Come to think of it, I had never traveled abroad before. This was my first time ever properly experiencing a different culture and country.

Who would’ve guessed my first foreign experience would be in the underworld? My life truly had taken a strange turn.

“This territory belongs to the House of Gremory,” the prez stated with pride.

“So all this, even the railway line, is your family’s land?!”

The prez nodded in response to my shocked question.

Seriously?! I could hardly believe it. This was all one surprise after another! Did that include the mountains and rivers and the town, too, then? So everyone who lived in that settlement we had just seen essentially served her family?

I stared across at the prez with renewed envy and respect.

Amazing! My master was super-rich! The sheer scale was beyond my wildest dreams!

“How much territory does the House of Gremory have?” I inquired.

I really wanted to know. My guess was around the size of one of the twenty-three wards of Tokyo.

Kiba glanced up from where he was sitting and responded, “If you want to compare it to places in Japan, it’s around the size of the main island of Honshu, as I recall.”

...*Huh?* I couldn’t believe my ears, but the words were clear enough.

“H-Honshu?!” I cried in shock.

The prez and Kiba both nodded.

“The underworld is around the same size as the human realm,” Rias began. “That said, even including demons, fallen angels, and the other species that reside here, the population is much lower. There’s no ocean, either, so there’s more available land.”

How many times was I going to be struck dumb with surprise today?! But I couldn’t help it. All this information was just too shocking!

In that case, the House of Gremory’s domain was almost as large as all of Japan. Was that why the prez was treated like a princess here? She truly was super-wealthy, at a scale beyond my comprehension!

“It might be similar in size to Honshu, but it’s mostly just untouched wilderness,” Rias muttered.

Regardless, I didn’t know how to respond to such a revelation.

By my side, Asia wore a look of raw confusion. Xenovia was no longer paying

any attention to her surroundings, and she looked to be discussing what kind of swords were used in the underworld with Kiba.

At that moment, the prez clapped her hands together, as if suddenly remembering something. “I almost forgot. Issei, Asia, Xenovia. You will all be requisitioned your own territories later, so please let me know what kind of places you want.”

“O-our own territories?!” I stammered.

“Of course. You’re all members of the Familia of the next family head. You’re all free to live within your territories. Akeno, Yuuto, Kiba, and Gasper already have theirs.”

A map suddenly popped into the air over Rias’s shoulder, unfolding as it settled down on her lap.

I wasn’t familiar with the terrain, but it appeared to be the House of Gremory’s territory.

The prez flashed me a grin. “The areas in red are already in use, so they’re off-limits, but everything else is available. Point out which places you want. I’ll let you have them.”

Mom, Dad? This trip has already taken an astounding turn...



For the next ten minutes or so, the train continued through this new, unknown world.

In the end, I settled on a bit of land filled with lakes, mountains, and abundant nature for my territory. That said, I wouldn’t have to worry about managing it for a long time yet, so for now, all I had done was make my selection.

Another announcement sounded. *“We will soon be arriving at the main Gremory residence. We will soon be arriving at the main Gremory residence. Thank you for riding with us today.”*

This was our stop!

I leaned out the window, glancing toward our destination... In the distance, I could make out a huge crowd of people waiting on the approaching platform!

What was going on?! Looking closely, some of them looked to be wearing military uniforms. Were they soldiers in the service of the House of Gremory?!

“Issei, we’re almost there. Close your window.”

“R-right...”

At the prez’s urging, we began to get ready to disembark. The train gradually came to a halt.

Thud.

Now that we had stopped moving, the prez led us all out the door.

Azazel, however, showed no sign of getting up.

“Huh? Aren’t you coming, Teach?”

“Ah, I’m planning to go head to the Demon King’s territory. I’ve got to attend a meeting with Sirzechs and the others. I was *invited*, I guess you could say. I’ll drop by the main Gremory residence once I’m done,” he said with a wave of his hand.

As the head of his organization, it looked like he had a busy schedule.

“I guess we’ll see you later, then, Teach.” I waved back.

“Give my brother my regards, Azazel,” the prez requested.

We continued down to the platform, when—

“Lady Rias, welcome home!”

—the crowd erupted in jubilation! Whoa! Talk about a scare!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Fireworks lit up the sky before I had a chance to regain my composure. The group of soldiers gave a customary gun salute, and a band of musicians began playing a celebratory song! Not only that, but a group of military people riding atop some mysterious flying creatures was waving huge flags through the sky.

Asia and I huddled together, out of place and unsure what to do with the sudden attention. Kiba and the others looked like they were used to it, but it was too much to take in for us newcomers! For her part, Xenovia kept blinking

in astonishment!

“Ahhhhh... So many people...” Gasper was so freaked out by the massive throng that he hid behind my back.

Looking carefully, I realized that there were a great many individuals who looked like butlers and maids in front of the crowd. They bowed their heads in unison as the prez approached them.

“Lady Rias, welcome home,” they said as one.

“Thank you, everyone,” she answered with a beaming smile.

At this, the butlers and maids finally relaxed. It was then that a familiar face stepped forward: the silver-haired maid, Grayfia!

“Welcome home, Lady Rias. You’re early. I’m delighted to see that you and your Familia made it here safely. Now, if you would all board the carriages we have waiting, we will take you to the main residence.”

Grayfia led us to a luxurious horse-drawn buggy. The steed was no ordinary animal, either. It was far larger than any I had ever seen, and its eyes were far more discerning, too. Perhaps all underworld horses were like this.

We had left our luggage on the train. However, when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that the maids had begun carrying out our bags.

“I’ll ride with my servants. This is Issei and Asia’s first time here, and they look a little nervous.”

Grayfia nodded in assent. “Very well. We have several carriages, so please use them as you see fit.”

Rias, Asia, Akeno, Xenovia, Grayfia, and I all boarded the first horse-drawn carriage. The remaining members took the second one.

Once we were all seated, the buggy began to move to the *clip-clop* of the horse’s hooves.

Whoa! I thought. This was my first time riding in anything so regal!

Looking out at the landscape, I saw a paved road surrounded by rows of neatly trimmed trees stretched out before me. The path ran straight ahead, and

at the end of it stood a ridiculously colossal building.

“P-P-P-P-Prez... I-is that a castle...?”

I was so surprised that my eyes were all but popping out of their sockets. I pointed out the window at the enormous fortress-like structure.

“That’s the main residence,” she replied with a grin.

...The main one? So there are others, too? Is this what it means to serve a high-ranking demon?

Outside, a garden of beautiful flowers was in bloom, with expertly crafted fountains gushing water and birds of every color imaginable fluttering about. The buggy rolled on for a little while until—

“We’re here,” the prez murmured as the doors swung open.

Someone dressed as a butler was already waiting to greet us.

Rias stepped out first, followed by us servants. The other carriages pulled in behind, and Kiba and the others disembarked, too.

Maids and butlers flanked both sides, and a red carpet had been laid down the center of the path toward the huge castle. The structure’s gates swung open with a heavy sound.

“Lady Rias, everyone. Please step forward,” Grayfia said with a formal bow, urging us to enter.

“Come on, let’s go,” the prez stated.

As she stepped onto the carpet, a small figure leaped out from the line of maids and ran toward her.

“Aunty Rias! You’re back!”

It was a cute young boy. He quickly wrapped his arms around the prez in a warm hug.

“Millicas! I’m home. Look how big you’ve grown!” she remarked lovingly, embracing him back.

“E-er, Prez? Who’s the kid?” I asked.

“This is Millicas Gremory,” she introduced. “My brother’s—that is, Sirzechs Lucifer’s—son. Meaning that he’s my nephew.”

Sirzechs’s kid?!

That made him the son of the Demon King! Whoa! So he was a real-life prince, then?!

“Millicas, say hello to the newest members of my Familia.”

“Hello. I’m Millicas Gremory. Nice to meet you.”

“Wh-what a polite kid! I—I... Er, I’m Issei Hyoudou!”

He may have been half my size, but I was so nervous standing before this child!

The prez let out a soft chuckle. “A Demon King’s name and title belong only to the individual who received them. Even though Millicas is my brother’s son, he is still considered a Gremory. He’s also a potential heir to the House of Gremory.”

That made him next in line after Rias, right? He was the eldest son’s flesh-and-blood child, after all, and even if Sirzechs had left his family, his son would probably still have a claim to inherit it.

Hold on, who’s Sirzechs’s wife? If he has a kid, he’s got a partner, too, right?

“Come along now, let’s head inside.” The prez took Millicas’s hand and led him toward the gate. Asia and I followed behind them, almost running to keep up. Gasper was still clinging to my back.

We passed through the towering entranceway and ventured into the castle, the rows of gates opening one after the next.

Finally, we arrived at what looked like an entrance hall. There was a huge staircase in the atrium ahead of us that led up to a second floor, and a huge chandelier hung from the ceiling. It was gigantic! A genuinely palatial hall! It was so big that you could practically hold an athletic meet in it!

“Lady Rias, allow me to escort you and your servants to your rooms,” Grayfia said, raising a hand and calling a group of maids to her.

Whoa, they're all such beauties! Are they going to serve us?!

"Well, I will have to say hello to Mother and Father," the prez said with a sigh.

"His Lordship is away at present but will be back by evening. He told me that he will speak with you over dinner tonight."

"Oh? Thank you, Grayfia. In that case, I suppose I'll ask everyone to go to their quarters. I assume their belongings have already been brought in?"

"Yes, their chambers are ready for use."

A little rest did sound enticing. Just coming to this castle had left me physically and emotionally exhausted... I was in an unfamiliar world, and my head was spinning from all the new sights and discoveries. Asia looked just as stunned as I was.

At that moment, a woman's voice called out from above. "Oh, Rias? You've already arrived?"

Descending from the grand stairwell ahead of us was a gorgeous woman garbed in a resplendent dress. She didn't look much older than we were, and her breasts were enormous!

Huh? Except for her flax-colored hair, she looked a lot like the prez! Her eyes were a little harsher, though...

Was she Rias's elder sister, perhaps? I'd thought everyone in her family had the same distinctive crimson hair...? Damn, she was fine, though. I felt like I was about to fall in love with her.

No sooner did she lay eyes on that woman than the prez broke out into a wide grin. "It's so good to see you again, Mother."

What? M-m-m-m-mother...? This beautiful young lady was Rias's mom?

"M-m-mother?! Th-that's impossible! Just look at her! She's too young! I thought she was your sister!" I balked in shock.

Come on, no matter how you looked at her, she definitely had to be the prez's sibling! She didn't look like a mom at all!

"Oh, I'm so delighted to hear you say that," replied the prez's mom as she

raised a hand to her cheek.

Ugh, that smile of hers was beyond cute!

“Demons can use their powers to control their physical appearances as they grow older,” Rias explained. “My mother frequently dresses like a teenage girl.”

That made sense. So she *was* the prez’s mother. Still, no matter how you sliced it, she certainly didn’t look more than a few years beyond the prez! This wasn’t good! I was utterly taken by Rias. She was 100 percent my type. Yet faced with her mother, I found myself succumbing to her, too! My heart was racing! Rias’s breasts must have come from her mother! I was weeping for joy! Praise those mighty genetics!

The prez pinched my cheek. “...You realize that my mother won’t indulge you no matter how much you fawn after her, right?”

Once again, she had read my mind. This was beyond helping, though. That lady was just too fine!

“Oh my, Rias. Is this Issei Hyoudou?”

“H-have you heard of me?” I stammered.

She nodded. “Of course. I *am* Rias’s mother. I saw you at my daughter’s engagement party.”

Oh...crap. She’d been at the party. Rescuing the prez was all I’d thought about at the time, so I hadn’t noticed.

I was the one who’d marched straight in and ruined that whole affair, even spiriting the would-be bride away! Was she going to chew me out? Punish me?!

I shivered in trepidation. The prez merely let out a soft chuckle.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you, Issei Hyoudou. I’m Rias’s mother, Venelana Gremory.”



A few hours after we arrived at the main estate, we gathered in the dining room for dinner. I didn’t know where to start with the vast assortment of sumptuous dishes, which were piled up so high and in such quantities that I could never hope to eat them all. Every single one of them looked delicious!

Rias was the first to take her seat, followed by us members of her Familia. Her father, mother, and Millicas soon joined us.

This was supposed to be the evening meal, but could it really be called such? There was no sun in the underworld; the land here was bathed in perpetual twilight.

Nonetheless, the sky *was* growing darker. Outside, an artificial moon was floating up above. From what I heard, it wasn't a natural celestial body, but rather a recreation forged from magic. Night in the underworld was similar. As the sky here was essentially purple in nature, it must have been the equivalent of daytime when we had arrived.

The concept of time in the underworld seemed to be modeled on that of the human world. From what I gathered, it had initially flowed differently here, but the Demon Kings had synchronized it with the human world so that traveling there wouldn't put you a hundred years ahead like in the tale of Urashima Taro. Or maybe it was the other way around? Heaven worked the same way, apparently.

In any event, it was a relief to hear that I wouldn't return to my hometown centuries in the future, or that years here wouldn't count as only a few days back home, either.

"Please enjoy yourselves," Rias's father entreated, and the meal began.

It was a huge, long table. A fancy chandelier hung from the ceiling up above, and even the chairs that we were sitting on looked inordinately expensive. It felt like I was looking at nothing *but* chandeliers lately. Even the guest suite I was using was filled with them. I was already starting to miss regular lights.

The canopy bed in my suite was huge as well! It was simply too much for one person alone!

Just how big was this place? My suite had all the necessities, such as a bathroom, toilet, refrigerator, television, and kitchen. It had a bedroom, a living room, and a bunch of other miscellaneous rooms, too. Asia and Xenovia had come to see me, and they'd looked equally impressed.

"Wow... Th-this is too big for one person...!" Asia had remarked.

“...I can’t relax in this kind of place. Sorry about this, but can I stay in your suite, Issei? Asia is staying with you too, right?” Xenovia asked.

Both girls had led simple lives during their tenure as servants of the Church, and they didn’t know what to do with themselves in the extravagant quarters they had been provided. Thus, they’d wound up moving their stuff into my suite.

Soon after, Grayfia had arranged for the two of them to stay with me... Admittedly, even I was feeling slightly overwhelmed by the amount of space I had been given, so that was fine with me. There was no way I would’ve been able to make full use of everything in my quarters. Sharing it with others was probably for the best.

Anyway, back to dinner. How was I supposed to consume all this food in front of me? Was there a particular order I was supposed to eat things in? What about special rules regarding which pieces of cutlery to use for each item? I could have asked one of the butlers or maids waiting on us, but none of the other club members seemed to have any questions...

I was having a hard time working out how best to put my knife and fork to the food before me. As hungry as I was, if I were to eat vulgarly, it would embarrass the prez. Kiba and Akeno were already eating so gracefully. I probably should have expected as much from our Queen and Knight.

Asia and Xenovia were struggling a little, too, but they were making out all right. As this was their first time here as well, the pair had introduced themselves at the same time I had.

Little Millicas was deftly working his way through his meal. Yep, a good upbringing sure made a world of difference. I came from an average household, so there was no way I could keep up with this upper-class life!

I glanced over at Gasper, who was quietly eating away with his tearful eyes held firmly shut. Given his reclusive nature and the number of demons we had met today, this must have been pretty hard on him.

Koneko...hadn’t touched her food. Typically, she would have been the first to dig into a hearty meal. She sure had been acting strangely over the past few days.

Our eyes met, and I gave her a friendly wave, but she merely averted her gaze, expressionless. She was never the kind of person to show a lot of emotion, but her reaction this time was even more vacant than usual.

Hmm... What's wrong, Koneko?

Azazel hadn't returned in time for dinner. His meeting must have run longer than anticipated.

"Members of Rias's Familia, please think of this as your own home," Rias's father said cheerfully. "I'm sure this is all very unfamiliar for you, having just arrived in the underworld, but if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask one of the servants. They will prepare it for you at once."

There isn't anything that I really want, though. Ah, wait! Would it be okay if I borrowed one of the maids for a night?! Can I avail myself of their nocturnal services?! I'd love for them to stay with me all night long!

Heh. As if. I'd been playing too many erotic video games and reading too much manga...

"By the way, Issei Hyoudou," Rias's father began, turning my way.

Whoa, this was nerve-racking! What was he going to ask?!

"Y-yes?!"

However, his question was the furthest thing from what I had been expecting.

"How are your parents?"

"A-ah! Right! They're both fine! Wh-when I told them I was going to visit the prez's, er, Rias's hometown, they asked me to bring back a souvenir! I-it was a pretty selfish thing to ask, I thought, considering the incredible renovations to our home, ha."

I had meant that as a joke, and yet—

"Hmm. A souvenir? I see." The prez's father rang a small handbell.

One of the butlers immediately stepped forward. "Sir?"

"Ready a castle for Issei's parents."

A castle?! For a souvenir?! Is this some kind of demonic joke?!

“Very good, sir. A western-style one, perhaps? Or a Japanese-style one?” the butler inquired utterly nonchalantly.

Hold on, is a castle a standard gift for these people?!

“Hmm, I wonder.”

“H-hold on! A-a castle is too much for a souvenir!” I hurriedly exclaimed, hoping to curtail Lord Gremory’s generosity.

If this was normal here, then I understood even less about the local culture and way of life than I had thought!

“Darling, Japan is a small country. A commoner wouldn’t be able to own a castle there,” the prez’s mom explained.

Thanks for the save! Yes, I’m just an average commoner!

“Oh? Yes, I suppose Japan *is* a small nation. Hmm. If a castle won’t do, I wonder what will...?”

“Father, I’m afraid that isn’t the way to go. Issei’s parents don’t have strong worldly desires,” the prez said.

Yep, she knew my mom and dad well!

“I see.” Her father nodded.

And so all talk about gifting my folks a castle was put to rest. That was a relief. They wouldn’t know what to do with a palace, and owning one would certainly make them targets of a lot of unwanted attention.

The last thing I wanted was for them to stand out like that.

“Issei Hyoudou.”

“Y-yes!”

This was the second time Rias’s father had directly addressed me! Why was he so interested in me specifically? Perhaps because I had the powers of the Red Dragon Emperor? I didn’t have any other particularly notable qualities.

“From now on, I won’t mind if you address me as your father-in-law.”

Now *that* was unexpected. Come to think of it, hadn’t Sirzechs asked me to

call him my brother-in-law? Was this like that?

“F-Father...? Th-that would be too great an honor!” I refused as politely as I could manage, waving my hands in front of me. I didn’t deserve that privilege!

“Darling, don’t you think you’re being a little hasty? There’s a proper order to things,” the prez’s mother chided.

“Hmm. But crimson and red, together. It would be a wonderful match, don’t you think?”

“Didn’t I just say that you’re rushing things, darling?”

“I suppose you did. I *do* tend to be a bit impatient at times.” Rias’s father let out a deep sigh. Judging by his interaction with his wife, it looked like she was the dominant one in their relationship.

Venelana’s words evidently held a lot of sway in the Gremory household. I realized that this dinner was an excellent opportunity to learn about the Gremory family dynamics.

The prez had fallen silent in embarrassment and had stopped eating.

“Issei Hyoudou. May I call you Issei?” Venelana inquired.

For some reason, it looked like I was the center of attention today!

“O-of course!”

I didn’t mind her addressing me by my first name!

“You’ll be staying with us for a while, won’t you?”

“Yes. So long as the pre—Rias is here, I will be, too. Why do you ask?”

“I see. Perfect. You will have to learn how to carry yourself as a gentleman. I’ll see that you study your manners while you’re here.”

Huh? Carry myself as a gentleman? What exactly does that mean? I wondered.

Thump!

That was the sound of someone slamming the table! I glanced around, only to find that the prez had risen to her feet.

“Father! Mother! I’ve been trying to hold my tongue, but what is the meaning of this?! Just what are you both trying to hint at?!”

At this outburst, Venelana narrowed her eyes. The smile that had greeted us so graciously earlier had evaporated.

“Be quiet, Rias. You’ve already broken off your engagement with Riser, no? You should be grateful we allowed you to do so. Do you realize how much effort it took your father and Sirzechs to smooth things over with the other high-class demons? Some have been saying that you selfishly used a legendary dragon as a means of ending your betrothal. Sister of a Demon King or not, there are limits to what you can get away with.”

Was that what people thought, that the prez had used the Red Dragon Emperor for her own desires...? Was that how they all thought of *me*?

I hadn’t wanted to lose Rias, and she’d said that she didn’t want to marry Riser in the first place. Looking back now, I had to wonder if I’d done the right thing by interfering. I wanted to believe I had.

Rias’s face twisted in anger. “Sirzechs has nothing to do with—”

“You don’t honestly think your brother wasn’t involved, do you?” Venelana interrupted. “He may need to keep up that pretense for appearance’s sake, but there’s no escaping the fact that everyone sees you as his sibling. And now that the three great powers are working together, your identity and position will be known by all. You won’t be able to keep behaving as you have been. Everyone will be keeping a close eye on you from here on out, Rias. Surely, you understand that this is your situation now, don’t you? You won’t be permitted another act of selfishness. So don’t get carried away. Is that clear?”

The prez looked truly vexed by her mother’s words but was unable to respond. Clearly unconvinced, she retook her seat.

Venelana breathed a quiet sigh before turning back to the rest of us with a smile. “I’m sorry you all had to see that. Returning to the topic at hand, Issei, you will be undertaking a special training regime during your stay here. You are to be introduced to as many aspects of high-class demon society as possible.”

Seriously? Did she want me to learn how to act like a noble? What about Kiba,

then? Or Gasper? Why only me? Did this have something to do with my parents' conversation with Rias's father the other day? Had they asked him to teach their dim-witted son manners and refinement or something?

No matter how many times I mulled it over, I couldn't for the life of me gauge the intentions of Rias's family.

"U-uh, why me?" I finally asked, pointing to myself.

At that moment, Venelana's smile morphed into a stern expression. "You, Issei, are the final act of selfishness that my daughter will be permitted as the future head of this family. As her mother, I will take full responsibility for ensuring you are up to snuff."

I glanced over at the prez, who met my gaze only for a split second before turning away, her cheeks scarlet.

This was no good. I couldn't follow the conversation at all! Just what kind of situation had I found myself in...?

Life.2

The Demon Youth Social!

“In other words, high-class demon society...”

The day after our arrival in the underworld, Rias’s parents assigned me a tutor to school me in etiquette and the expectations of the nobility. This was my first lesson.

The man in front of me was only one of my private tutors. I guess that meant there would be others, too? Talk about a downer. I would never have expected that I would have to spend my summer break studying in the demon world.

Well, it was true that I didn’t know a great deal about demon society, so it *would* probably prove quite valuable. And my instructor was more than willing to answer my every question.

The current lesson sounded vital, so I was busy scribbling down memos in my notebook. I couldn’t help but wonder whether I would have time to complete my homework from Kuou Academy in addition to all this...

Millicas was sitting by my side, studying along with me. For a kid, he was remarkably diligent and bright.

The prez and the other club members were busy touring various places of interest among the Gremory territory. I was beyond jealous!

They had gone first to Rias’s private castle, then on to the palace where Sirzechs stayed when he visited his hometown, and then to yet more! They were practically checking out all the castles in the region! It wasn’t fair! I wanted to see them!

“Young Master, can you read the demon script?” my tutor asked me.

“N-not really.”

“Very well. Then let’s begin by looking at the characters one by one.”

I didn't even know the basics, but my instructor was incredibly polite and patient in teaching me.

Still, what exactly did he mean by "Young Master"? Since last night, all the servants had been calling me that.

"I must teach you everything there is to know about the House of Gremory, Young Master. Prepare yourself."

"U-um, why are you calling me that?"

"...Now then, let's move on to the history of the House of Gremory."

He dodged the question. I understood why learning about demon society was important, but why was studying up on every last detail of the prez's family so critical? Was it because I was part of her Familia? Had Kiba and the others studied all this after being turned into demons as well? If so, why weren't Asia and Xenovia with me? I had no idea what was going on!

Click.

The door swung open, and in strode the prez's mother, Venelana. Yep, she was definitely a beauty.

"Grandma!"

Right, she was also Millicas's grandmother. There was no denying that she looked young enough to be Rias's sister, however.

"Issei, Millicas. Have you been making good progress with your studies?" she asked, greeting us all with a soft smile.

I didn't want her to see my clumsy attempts at writing the demon script, but she flashed me a warm look when she glanced at my notes.

"I see that you are just as dedicated as Sirzechs and Grayfia reported. I can't say that your writing is impeccable, but at least you're making an effort to learn."

A maid who had arrived with Venelana began to serve tea.

"Rias will be returning soon, as the traditional Demon Youth Social will be held in the Demon King's territory."

Oh, right. That was on Rias's schedule.

From what I understood, it sounded like all young high-class demons the prez's age were expected to gather together to meet prior to their formal debuts in the Rating Game. Apparently, the Demon Kings invited the heirs of old and noble families to attend so that they could formally greet one another.

Both the prez and the student council chairwoman at school, Sona Sitri, would be present. As Rias's Familia, all of us club members were expected to go as well.

It had been one thing straight after another since coming to the underworld. What was lying in wait for us next?



No sooner did the prez and the others return from their castle sightseeing trip than we set off by train for the Demon King's territory.

On the way, the locomotive passed through several magic circles suspended over the tracks. The arrays were used for long-distance travel. After close to three hours, we finally arrived at a great metropolis!

Both the station and the platform were completely modern in design! There were even vending machines! They were a little different in design from those where I lived, but they were clearly state-of-the-art, as were the towering skyscrapers that comprised the city!

"This is Lucifard, the Demon King's territory and the old capital of the underworld where the original Lucifer is said to have resided," Kiba explained.

So this was the first Lucifer's old base of operations?

Incidentally, we were all dressed in our Kuou Academy summer uniforms. They were practically our Familia's signature look by now.

"From here, we'll need to change to the subway line. We'll draw too much attention if we go to the venue up in the open," Kiba continued.

So people make a big deal of the relatives of famous figures here, too? The longer I spent in this place, the more it seemed similar to the human world!

Come to think of it, humans and demons did have a particularly close

relationship. There were the pacts we made, the Evil Pieces system used to recruit humans into one's Familia, and reincarnation, too. You could probably say we were mutually dependent. I couldn't help but wonder whether adopting elements of human culture and merging them with its own was a core part of how demon society worked.

"Yahhhhhh! Princess Riaaaaas!"

All of a sudden, a high-pitched cry echoed across the platform. I glanced around—only to find a crowd of demon onlookers on the platform above waving to us—to the prez—in excitement.

"The president is the Demon King's younger sister and a renowned beauty in her own right. That makes her the object of admiration for a great many low- and middle-ranking demons," Akeno said to me.

Seriously?! Is she a celebrity here or something?

Of course she was popular! Her brother was the Demon King, she was the heir to a noble high-class demon family, and she was a gorgeous lady!

"Yarghhhhh... So many people..."

Gaspar shrank behind my back, panicking at the sound of so many strange voices. His days as a shut-in weren't getting any easier.

"What a bother. Let's change to the subway line before this gets out of hand. Is the private train ready?" Rias asked a nearby black-clad attendant.

The servant was one of many, seemingly a bodyguard of sorts who had accompanied us all the way from the main Gremory residence. They were all apparently pretty strong. That made sense—you would need to have considerable fighting ability to protect Rias and her family from the kinds of threats they faced.

"Yes. Please follow me." And so the bodyguard led us to the subway platform where another train was waiting for us.

"Riaaaaas!"

The prez seemed to be popular with men, too. She waved to the nearby crowd, flashing them a strained smile.

Yep, my master sure was incredible!

We changed to the subway line and rode the next train for five minutes before arriving at our destination—the station beneath the largest building in the city.

This structure was the venue for the formal gala where coming of age demons belonging to high-class or big-shot families were to gather. It looked like the bodyguards weren't allowed inside, so they only accompanied us as far as the elevator.

The prez led us all into the spacious, extravagant elevator.

"Listen, everyone. No matter what happens, don't lose your head. You can't get into a fight, regardless of what anyone says to you. These people are our future rivals. We mustn't do anything that might harm our reputations."

The prez's voice was even more intense than usual. That was the tone of someone who was ready for battle and wasn't about to lose!

Asia and I both gulped as we tried to calm and prepare ourselves. I was nervous, but there were probably other Pawns here, too, and I wasn't about to make a fool of myself in front of them!

We rode the elevator up for a good while, but it eventually came to a stop.

The prez leading us, we stepped out into a large hall. A servant was the first to greet us with a polite bow. "Welcome, Lady Gremory. Please, this way."

The attendant led us down a long corridor, past several individuals standing in the corner of the room.

"Sairaorg!" Rias exclaimed.

It looked like she knew one of those people.

It was a young man, around the same age as us. He must have recognized the prez, too, as he gave her a quick nod before approaching.

He was a wildly handsome pretty boy with short black hair and a muscular, athletic physique. He looked like a professional wrestler! Maybe he was a martial artist? His eyes were a strange purple.

Something about his face struck me as similar to the prez—or rather, as similar to Sirzechs.

“It’s been a long time, Rias,” he said, shaking her hand with a grin on his face.

Was he one of the young demons making their debut here today? So I was right: He, too, was a high-class demon. In any event, even I, a low-class demon, could sense the strength and power he held.

A group of individuals who must have been his Familia was staring our way. Every single one of them looked like they knew how to handle themselves in a fight...

“It has. I’ve missed you. I’m glad to see you haven’t changed. I have some new servants. Everyone, this is Sairaorg, my cousin on my mother’s side,” the prez introduced.

Hold on, her cousin?!

That was why his appearance reminded me of Sirzechs!

“Sairaorg Bael, heir to the House of Bael.”

Bael?! As in the princely House that ranks just below the Demon Kings themselves?! Even I recognized that name! Did that mean Rias’s mother was also from the House of Bael?

A princely Familia! A princely House! Wow! So the Gremory family had both a Demon King and a prince!

The prez ignored my uncontained shock, addressing the next head of the Bael family. “What are you doing lurking out here in the corridors?”

“Ah. I couldn’t stand it in there. I had to step outside.”

“...You couldn’t stand it? Have the others arrived?”

“Agares and Astaroth have. Then Zephyrdor got here and decided to pick an argument with Agares.” The pretty boy, Sairaorg, spoke those names with genuine disdain.

What could those other two high-class demons possibly have been fighting about?

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

Suddenly, the building shook violently! What was going on?! That noise had come from somewhere nearby!

The prez, perhaps as curious as I was, didn't hesitate to make her way to the source of that sound: a large double-leaf door.

"This is why I suggested we hold off on the social mingling until after the formalities," Sairaorg remarked with a sigh, signaling to his own Familia and following after the prez.

Huh?! What?! Unanswered questions coursed through my mind, but I had no choice but to hurry after my master.

Beyond that large entrance was a spacious banquet hall filled with the wreckage of countless tables, chairs, and decorations!

The demons assembled within had split evenly into two camps, glaring at one another from across the center of the room, weapons drawn. It was a tinderbox ready to blow!

On one side was a group of menacing, evil-looking demons. On the other stood a band of comparatively normal ones. Both sides were emanating frighteningly cold and murderous auras.

Talk about scary! I could practically taste their power! Instantly, I understood that they were far more formidable than we were!

One demon Familia was sitting with graceful quietude at the single remaining untouched table in a corner of the hall. A young man with a soft countenance sat at its center...surrounded by a group wearing ominous hoods.

The two factions glared across at each other balefully.

"Zephyrdor, must you really start a fight now of all times? Do you have a death wish? I wonder whether any of the higher-ups would blame me for killing you," a female demon said coolly.

So they were already at the point where they were talking about murdering each other...

Whoa!

Danger aside, that girl making threats was incredibly attractive! She appeared close to my age. She was wearing glasses. The cold, sharp glare behind them was terrifying. Yep, she was definitely formidable. And the strength and density of her aura were chilling...

She was wearing a blue robe, one that revealed very little skin. That was a bit of a shame, to be honest.

“Ha! I’ll say it again, bitch! If you want a purging, virgin, I’ll be happy to oblige! You’re always hiding behind your guards! That’s why you still haven’t done it yet! You won’t let any guy get near you! Seriously, you Demon King families make me sick! I only offered to give you a hand for the opening round!”

That man certainly could run his mouth. He had black-colored occult tattoos on his face, a bare chest, green spiked hair, and some kind of glittering ornaments hanging from his trousers.

No matter how you looked at it, he was a tough-guy delinquent through and through. I had no idea there were people like him in the underworld... He might have been good-looking under normal circumstances, but his expression was just too wild, too dangerous.

What exactly was going on between these two? Had this macho tough guy sexually harassed the girl with the glasses?

Sairaorg approached us from behind and began to explain: “We’re supposed to wait in this hall until the event gets underway. Or rather, the old high-class families set aside this room for us to greet each other and air any bad blood. I didn’t want to get involved in all this, but I guess it can’t be helped now.”

Cracking his neck, Sairaorg walked right into the middle of those two opposing Familias.

Hold on! Can’t he see how dangerous that is?! They were ready to go for each other’s throats!

I moved to caution him, but the prez held me back. “Issei. Watch Sairaorg carefully.”

“Huh? A-all right. But why? Because he’s your cousin?”

“Because he’s the number one demon youth.”

Seriously?! The number one?! As in the strongest?!

Sairaorg put himself between the two Familias on the verge of breaking out into a complete brawl. All eyes turned his way.

“Princess Seekvaira of House Agares. Zephyrdor, rebellious heir of House Glasya-Labolos. I realize that this is sudden, but I will say it only once: if you take this any further, you will face me as your opponent. Depending on what you say or do next, my fists shall show no mercy.”

What a bold declaration! Sairaorg was incredible! Even my skin was tingling in trepidation!

I could see a vein throbbing in the tough-guy demon’s forehead as he turned red with anger. “I’m not about to let anyone from the incompetent House of Bael—”

Slam!

Before Zephyrdor could even finish speaking, he was sent flying into the far wall!

Thud!

Next, he collapsed facedown onto the ground, unconscious!

It had only taken one hit! Sairaorg had knocked out that seemingly super-powered tough guy in a single blow!

“I told you. That was your only warning.”

“How dare you!”

“Damn you, Bael!”

The members of Zephyrdor’s Familia began to rush forward.

“See to your master. That should be your first priority. You won’t gain anything by turning your weapons against me. Besides, the function is about to begin, so try to wake him.”

The members of Zephyrdor’s Familia stopped at this chiding and obeyed Sairaorg’s instruction.

Next, Sairaorg turned to the bespectacled woman. I could understand why her gaze stiffened.

“You still have time. Go and redo your makeup. You don’t want to attend such an important event looking like that.”

“I—I know.” She spun around and made her way out of the hall with her Familia in tow.

After watching her leave, Sairaorg turned to his own Familia. “Call the staff. This place is a mess. Get them to tidy it up so I can have tea with Rias.”

There was undeniably something charming about the way Sairaorg conducted himself.

I mean, he was so strong! And cool! I could see why he was the number one demon youth!

This could very well have been the first time in my life that I had met such a cool guy so close in age to myself.

“Ah, Hyoudou!” called a familiar voice.

I turned my head and found another group clad in the uniform of Kuou Academy.

“Saji? Oh, Chairwoman!”

“How are you today, Rias, Hyoudou?”

Saji and Chairwoman Sona had arrived.



“I am Seekvaira Agares, heir to the archducal House of Agares,” the glasses-wearing demon we had seen in the hall a short time earlier said in greeting to us members of the Gremory Familia.

Following the incident with Zephyrdor, a group of servants at the venue quickly used their powers to return the reception hall to its earlier state.

Once again, the young masters and their Familias gathered together around a large table and were exchanging formal greetings, except for Zephyrdor and his group, that is.

This included the prez—Rias Gremory—and her Familia, Chairwoman Sona Sitri and her Familia, and Sairaorg Bael and his Familia. Zephyrdor was the head of the Glasya-Labolas Familia.

To think that the stern-eyed girl who'd nearly thrown a punch was the heir to an archducal House! The archdukes acted as immediate agents of the Demon Kings and were responsible for directing us regular demons!

The prez had said that if the Demon Kings were like company presidents, then the archdukes were their chief directors. It seemed a little strange to me that there could be four company presidents, but that was just how things worked in the underworld.

"Greetings. I'm Rias Gremory, heir to the House of Gremory," the prez stated next.

The chairwoman followed her. "Sona Sitri, heir to the House of Sitri."

The masters were sitting at the table with their Familias waiting behind them. That included us as well.

"And I'm Sairaorg Bael, the next head of the princely House of Bael," Sairaorg introduced himself proudly.

Yep, he had an air of dignity about him, all right. There was no doubting why he was the number one among all the high-class demons attending this soiree.

Next, the young male demon who'd been sitting in the corner drinking tea spoke. "Diodora Astaroth, the next head of the House of Astaroth. It's a pleasure, everyone."

His voice was calm and soothing. He was a demon, but he looked like the kind of person who wouldn't harm a fly. I couldn't help but wonder whether he wasn't hiding some incredible ability beneath that peaceful veneer.

Astaroth... Hmm. If my memory served correctly, Beelzebub belonged to that family.

The tough guy from before was set to inherit the House of Glasya-Labolas, so that must have meant he was related to Asmodeus.

Was it really okay for someone like that to be handed the reins of such a vital

clan? I'd thought the siblings of the four free-spirited Demon Kings were all supposed to be overly serious and diligent.

"The House of Glasya-Labolas is in the midst of a little family trouble. Their primary successor passed away unexpectedly just a short time ago, and Zephyrdor is a potential candidate to take his place," Sairaorg explained.

Seriously? I hadn't realized his family was going through so much turmoil. Then again, it didn't change the fact that the prospect of him ruling an important House didn't sound like something that would end well... Still, it wasn't my business to question how other families went about things.

Altogether, there were six high-class demon youths present. Judging by appearances, their Familias looked pretty strong, too. I was likely the weakest one here... I couldn't help but feel out of place.

Gremory and Lucifer, Sitri and Leviathan, Astaroth and Beelzebub, and Glasya-Labolas and Asmodeus, not to mention a princely and an archducal family, too...

Talk about big shot names! This was like a dream team! No wonder people expected a lot from them. It wasn't hard to imagine that each of these members was destined for greatness in the future.

Maybe it was because they all belonged to high society, but they held distinctive personalities and presences. Still, I had to wonder what the purpose of gathering them all here was.

"Hey, Hyoudou. Wipe that stupid look off your face," Saji said with a sigh.

"Huh? I'm nervous. I mean, look at them all. Can't you see how strong they all are?"

"What are you talking about? You're the Red Dragon Emperor. Have a little pride."

"That's easy for you to say... Why does it bother *you*, though?"

"We Familia members have to behave with dignity here, too, okay? Those high-class demons aren't just watching each other—they're observing the Familias of their potential opponents as well. So if you don't straighten up, you'll make Rias look bad. Get a grip! You're the Red Dragon Emperor and part

of the Gremory Familia!”

Saji’s insightfulness took me by surprise.

“You’re Rias’s prized servant... I’d do anything to be for the chairwoman what you are for her.” He flashed me a forced grin.

Huh? What is he getting at?

But before I could voice my doubts, the doors to the function hall swung open.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. Please, everyone is waiting inside.”

The event was finally getting underway!

The room that we and our high-class demon masters were led to had an unusual air about it.

Distinguished figures sat in stadium-like seats that overlooked us. There was another tier of spectators beyond them, too.

On the highest level was a familiar face—the Demon King Sirzechs. Serafall was beside him, albeit not dressed in her magical girl outfit.

Two more people were sitting with Rias’s brother. I didn’t know their faces, but they had to be Beelzebub and Asmodeus, right? They both looked remarkably young, but I could feel the strength of their demon powers simply by looking at them.

Being stared at by the most influential figures in demon society was pretty unsettling. It felt like they saw every little move I made.

We members of the prez’s Familia stood in a line behind her. There wasn’t anything expected of us, but I was still nervous. It was deathly quiet. Unable to stand it, I turned my gaze to the women in the other Familias.

There were beast girls and women who looked like former humans. I would’ve given just about anything to hit it off with one of them later!

While I was getting myself all worked up, the six young high-class demons, the prez included, stepped forward. The tough guy from before was back, although

there was a noticeable bruise on his cheek. He *had* taken a hell of a punch. Without a power like Asia's Twilight Healing, the injury would take a while to mend.

There was no way I would let someone like him get anywhere near Asia, though. There was no telling what he might do to her.

"Thank you all for coming. We have gathered you here today so that we can look on the faces of the next generation and assess the prospects of our youth," began an old male demon solemnly as he crossed his arms.

"Looks like they've already had at it, though..." added a mustached man sarcastically.

He was talking about the fight a short while ago. That had taken me by surprise as well. I guess it couldn't simply be dismissed as youthful passion.

"In terms of name, pedigree, and ability, you six are the most promising demons among your peers," Sirzechs declared from his seat on the highest gallery. "As such, prior to your formal debuts, we would have you compete against one another to better yourselves."

Hold on, so he was saying we were all going to have to fight in Rating Games? Come to think of it, Azazel had mentioned something about holding a few Rating Games during our so-called training camp. Was this what he'd meant?

"Will we be expected to fight the Khaos Brigade in time?" Sairaorg questioned, looking at the Demon Kings.

"That is yet to be seen. If possible, I would prefer not to send our young people against them," Sirzechs replied.

Sairaorg raised an eyebrow, as if unconvinced by that response. "Why not? We may be young, but we can fulfill our duty as demons. If we do nothing but rest on our laurels while others take care of everything, how will we ever—?"

"Sairaorg, we acknowledge your bravery. But you are reckless. It is paramount that those who are still maturing not be forced into battle. Please understand. It would be too great a loss if anything were to happen to our next generation. You are more precious to us than you realize. And that is why you must proceed gradually, step by well-prepared step."

Sairaorg looked more or less convinced by Sirzechs's assertion. "I understand," he answered, although his expression suggested he was still somewhat dissatisfied.

After that, the Demon Kings and the other boss demons kept going on about upcoming Rating Games and all kinds of other things I didn't fully understand. It felt like my head was going to explode from all these incomprehensible words.

I couldn't wait for this to be over.

Hold it, even when this is done with, we have training, right?

We weren't going to get any chance to rest. I would have liked to have been able to take a short nap before diving into work.

"Now then, to cut a long story short, our hopes and dreams lie with you, young ones. Please understand that. You are the underworld's greatest treasures."

Everyone in the room hung on Sirzechs's words. I immediately understood that there was no pretense or falsehood in what he was saying. There was no denying he and Rias were related. He was kindhearted on an intrinsic level. By nature, he was friendly and fun to be around.

"Before we finish, we would like to hear about each of your future goals."

Sairaorg was the first to respond to Sirzechs's prompt. "My dream is to become a Demon King."

Where did that come from?! What ambition!

"Oh..." The higher-ups let out gasps of admiration at this declaration and the confidence with which it had been made.

"A Demon King from a princely House is unheard of," one of the high-ranking bosses remarked.

"When the people of the underworld feel there is no choice but to make me a Demon King, that is when I shall accept the position."

There he went again! Sairaorg sure had guts!

Leaving no time for more surprise from the audience, the prez announced her

ambitions: “My goal is to succeed as the next head of the House of Gremory and to win every last Rating Game competition!”

Ah, so those are her goals!

This was the first time I’d heard her state her plans for the future so definitely, but it was precisely the sort of response I would have expected from the prez. The other members of her Familia and I would have to do our best to ensure her dreams came true!

The remaining demon youths stated their own intentions, until finally, it was Sona’s turn.

“I want to build a school here in the underworld to teach demons how to fight in the Rating Game.”

A school! So the chairwoman’s goal is to run an academy of her own? I was struck with admiration, but the higher-ups furrowed their brows in disfavor.

“Isn’t there already a place for learning about Rating Games?” one of them questioned.

“Only high-class demons and those of privileged rank are permitted to enroll there,” the chairwoman answered coolly. “I would build a school where there are no ranks or social classes, a place where even low-ranking demons and reincarnated humans can attend.”

Whoa, an academy of equality? That sounded pretty nice. The underworld could sure do with a place like that. Saji was nodding along with admiration.

Unfortunately...

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Laughter filled the audience hall.

I didn’t understand. Why had all the higher-ups started guffawing? I glanced at the prez, whose eyes were narrowed in ire. What was going on?

It didn’t make any sense. And it wasn’t just me. Saji was clearly confused as well.

“Impossible!”

“It’s absurd!”

“I see! So she’s a dreamy-eyed maiden!”

“Ah, I remember what it was like to be young and ignorant! Yet for the heir to the House of Sitri to cling to such a fantasy... All I can say is thank goodness she said so here before her debut.”

Nope, I didn’t get it at all. Why were they making fun of her?

“...The underworld has grown a little more progressive than it used to be, but there is still rampant and institutionalized discrimination between high-and low-class demons. The same goes for pure-blooded and reincarnated demons. Many people think of such hierarchies as the natural way,” Kiba whispered to me.

“Huh? But the prez’s family treated us so well.”

“Issei. The House of Gremory is known to be an especially affectionate demon clan. They don’t view humans or low-class demons with the disdain that others do... Remember Riser Phenex?”

“...”

Right. Riser Phenex certainly had looked down on me, both as a low-class demon and as a servant. Come to think of it, there may have been more than a touch of prejudice in his attitude.

Amid the mirth of the higher-ups, the chairwoman spoke flatly: “I’m serious.”

Serafall nodded along emphatically in agreement, as if all but shouting out, *Well said!* Still, she looked worried. As a Demon King, she probably couldn’t throw too much overt support behind her sister.

One of the bigwigs responded dispassionately, “Sona Sitri. Low-class demons and reincarnated ones live to serve their masters and are chosen specifically for their preexisting talents. To build a training facility such as what you are proposing would be an affront to all those old families who pride themselves on tradition. We may be in a period of change and transformation, but there are some things that simply cannot be given up. Educating low-class demons should be none of your concern...”

That was when Saji decided he'd had enough.

"I can't take this anymore! Why are you all making fun of the chairwoman's—of Lady Sona's dreams?! What's wrong with you all?! Who are you to decide she can't do it?! We're all completely serious down here!"

"Hold your tongue, reincarnated demon. Lady Sona, your servant doesn't know his place," one of the high-ranking demons scolded.

Where did these jerks get off?! *They* were the ones acting improperly! They'd asked to hear the chairwoman's goals and then belittled them!

If they had treated the prez that way, I would have done exactly as Saji had.

"...My apologies. I'll speak to him later," the chairwoman responded, her expression unchanging.

Saji seemed unable to comprehend her reaction. "Chairwoman! Why?! They're making fun of you! Of your—of *our* dream! Why should you have to take that in silence?!"

"Saji, be quiet. This isn't the time or place for your attitude. I've stated my plans for the future. That's all there is to it," she reprimanded with a frown.

"—!" Saji looked like he had more he wanted to say, but he fell silent.

"Say, if my little Sona does well in a Rating Game, you won't have any complaints, will you?! One's skill in the Rating Game decides so many things in life!" Leviathan's suggestion sent a shock through the crowd. She was clearly pissed. "I've had it up to here with you all! You old geezers! How long are you going to keep on tormenting my cute little Sona?! I'm at my limit! If you keep on bullying her, I'll have to take out my frustration on you all!" Serafall cried out with tears in her eyes.

The gathered high-ranking demons had trouble responding, merely blinking in consternation. The chairwoman, for her part, covered her face in embarrassment. What an indescribable situation...

That said, Serafall's outburst did make me feel a little better. As far as I was concerned, no one had the right to belittle another person's dreams. In that respect, it was about time for the underworld to go through some changes.

The chairwoman's goal was a high-minded one. I thought those in charge should respect that. Maybe they'd lived too long and had grown stuck in their ways.

That said, there were many traditions I still wasn't familiar with. As a member of Rias Gremory's Familia, it was my job to learn as many of them as I could.

"Very good. In that case, how about we have a Rating Game among our six up-and-comers?" Sirzechs suggested, focusing the room's attention on himself.

You've gotta be kidding! We're going to fight?!

"Rias, Sona. Will you compete against each other?"

Everyone in both Familias gawked at this proposal.

"..."

"..."

The prez and the chairwoman glanced at each other, blinking in surprise.

Sirzechs paid them no heed, however. "We were already planning to schedule Rias's first match in a few days. Azazel has been gathering fans of the Rating Game from among the three great powers under the pretext of watching our bright young talents compete before their debuts. This seems like an excellent opportunity. Rias versus Sona would make for an interesting bout, wouldn't you all say?"

Is Sirzechs talking about the final Rating Game that Azazel was organizing as the culmination of our training camp?! We're going up against the student council chairwoman?!

Somehow, we'd walked into a showdown between the two high-class demons of Kuou Academy?!

The prez breathed a deep sigh before flashing the chairwoman a defiant grin. It looked like she was into the idea!

And the chairwoman beamed back! She was raring to go as well!

"It may not be an official match, but it feels like fate that my first Rating Game opponent should be you, Rias."

“I’m not about to lose, Sona.”

Both of them were burning with determination! The prez versus the chairwoman! The Occult Research Club versus the student council!

“Yay! A match between Rias and Sona! I’m so excited!” Serafall exclaimed with a joyful wink.

“We shall schedule it for August twentieth by the human calendar. You may spend your time until then as you see fit. The details will be provided to you closer to the date,” Sirzechs declared, making it official. The Rating Game between the prez and the chairwoman was on!



“Heh, so you’ll be facing the Sitri girl,” Azazel remarked when we arrived back at the main Gremory estate.

We had all gathered in the spacious living room to tell our instructor what had happened during the function.

“It’s still July twenty-eighth in the human world, so that leaves us around twenty days...” Azazel paused there, as if running some mental calculations.

“F-for training, you mean?” I asked.

“Of course. We start tomorrow. I’ve already planned a full regimen for each of you.”

“Is it really okay for us to get advice from the governor of the fallen angels? *Only* us? I mean, isn’t that a bit unfair?” I couldn’t help but worry that the other demon youths might have a thing or two to say about the assistance he was giving us.

Azazel didn’t seem too concerned. “It’s fine. Besides, I’ll be filling in the other side on a whole lot of data, too. And apparently, the angels also have a backup system in place. The rest depends on all of you demon kids. If you’re serious about getting stronger and ensuring the survival of your species, then take all the help you can get.”

I guess that was one way of looking at it.

“Heh, my lieutenant governor is already giving the other demon Houses a

whole lot of info and advice. Ha-ha-ha! Shemhazai's input might be even more useful than mine!"

Please don't say that, Teach. We're stressed enough here as it is. This fallen angel was too upbeat. Still, that was what made him so easy to be around.

"Anyway, meet me in the garden tomorrow morning. I'll get you all started on your individual training programs then. Be ready," Azazel stated.

"Okay!" we all responded in unison.

Our match was only weeks away! We would need to practice our butts off to be ready! Above all else, I had to get at least a little closer to Vali's level of skill!

Grayfia then entered the room. "Everyone, the hot spring is ready for you all now."

My ears had never heard such fantastic news!

In a corner of the vast garden surrounding the main Gremory residence was a Japanese-style hot spring.

I was soaking in the men's area with Azazel and Kiba.

Ah, it was so soothing. It was truly luxurious.

"Journeying far from home..." Azazel sang softly to himself as he relaxed in the warm water.

He had let his twelve pitch-black wings unfold from his back.

"Ha-ha-ha. Yep, the best thing about the underworld—about Hell—has to be the hot springs. And this private one reserved for one of the underworld's most famous families ranks among the best."

The governor looked like he was fairly knowledgeable when it came to such things. That's when I remembered he'd been wearing a summer *yukata* the first few times I had met him. Maybe he was a Japanese culture aficionado.

Kiba and I were soaking in the water side by side, our towels wrapped around our heads.

Although usually a cool customer, Kiba had been acting awfully creepy in the bath. He'd even asked me, "Issei, shall I wash your back for you?"

What the heck was that?! I swear I saw him blushing while popping the question! For a moment, I thought he was planning on taking my chastity then and there!

He probably placed great worth on socializing naked with a friend—even if that person was another man. We’d never really had a chance to open up to each other during our previous training camp, so I was still somewhat reserved around him.

...Wait, where’s Gasper?

He may have been a cross-dresser, but did that mean he was too timid to engage in this kind of male bonding?

I looked around and, sure enough, there he was, loitering by the entrance.

Argh, I guess I have no choice!

I stepped out of the water and headed his way. “Hey, come on. This is a hot spring. You have to try it!” I called as I approached.

“Kyaah!” he cried back in a cute, high-pitched shriek.

“Kyaah”...? Hold on... Don’t cover your chest with your towel like that! You aren’t a girl...! Dammit! He *did* look just like one, though, with his thin body and feminine face! How on Earth had he wound up born as a dude?!

Perhaps because I was ogling him, Gasper’s face turned red. “...U-um, please don’t stare at me...”

“...G-Gasper! Y-you’re a guy, so don’t wear your towel up over your chest! You dress like a girl enough as it is, and this only confuses me even more!”

“...W-was that how you were looking at me, Issei...? I feel like I’m in danger now!”

“Shut up!”

If he kept this up, I would find myself spirited off to a whole other world! Which was why I grabbed the maidenly Gasper in my arms and dashed straight for the hot spring!



Splash!

I hurled him deep into the water.

“Yarghhhhh! It’s hottttttttt! I’m going to meeeelt! Isseiiiiiii!”

His screams echoed throughout the area! That idiot! The women’s baths were right next door!

“Issei, stop sexually harassing Gasper!”

That was the prez! And then her voice was followed by giggling from the women’s bathing area! Arghhhhh! This was humiliating!

Unable to take their ridicule, I leaped into the water, sinking down past my head before shooting up again!

All I had done was help that shut-in...

“By the way, Issei,” began Azazel, approaching me in my despondence with a lecherous grin.

“Yes?”

“Have you ever felt Rias’s breasts?” he asked, wriggling his fingers.

“Y-yes! With this very hand!” I raised my right hand into the air in a gesture of victory!

The prez’s breasts were the best sensation I had ever felt! I would never forget it! That I had groped them made me feel lucky to be alive!

“I see. In that case...” Nodding, the fallen angel pointed his index finger at my face. “Have you ever poked a woman’s nipple with your finger?” he questioned.

“—! ...N-not yet...”

Azazel sighed at this reaction. “Oh. So you haven’t stroked them? Have you never teased her? You aren’t supposed to just prod at it, you know? You’ve got to fondle it. There’s no greater sight than your finger dancing around, burying itself in a woman’s breast.”

What...? Huh...? D-d-dancing around...? B-b-burying itself...? In a b-b-breast...? F-fondling a nipple...?

Th-the prez's were so big! How far would I be able to sink my fingers in them?! No!

"Th-the prez's tits aren't doorbells!" I cried out!

They weren't buzzers! Still, just imagining her chest only made my love for her swell even further!

Nonetheless, Azazel shook his head with a sneer. "Nope, when you put it that way, they *are* a lot like doorbells. They make a sound when you press them, no? *Ooooooh...*"

?!

In my mind, I could hear the prez breathing out a deep, sensual moan. *What on earth...? I—I never even imagined that such sounds existed.*

"...I never realized breasts and nipples could do that... All this time, I thought they were only there for rubbing, sucking, and holding. I see, so you can poke and prod them and get them to purr..."

None of that had ever occurred to me. How had I gone so long without picking up that morsel of wisdom?

I was so caught up in my obsession with fondling and sucking them that I forgot about squeezing and massaging! I was such a slow learner!

Azazel patted me on the head. "That's why you've still got a long way to go. A woman's breasts are objects of infinite possibilities—even more than that Ouroboros, Ophis, got it? It was my fascination with breasts that brought about my fall from heaven. And I don't regret it one bit."

I knew it. This guy was awesome. No wonder the fallen angels had made him their governor!

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I turned to Azazel, my voice trembling. "Teach... I—I want to massage those breasts, to poke and prod them..."

At this desperate plea, he ruffled my hair and said soothingly, "Yeah. Don't give up, Issei. Knowing you, you can do it. Throw in the towel now, and those boobs will never be yours, got it?"

"Yes. Yes!"

So long as I persisted, I would always keep moving forward! If I kept pushing onward, I would eventually be able to fondle the prez's breasts! And then I would make her cry out in ecstasy! My fingers were going to make her squeal!

At that moment, the voices from the women's bathing area echoed over to our side once more.

"Oh dear, Rias. Has your bust grown larger? Do you mind if I touch it?"

"H-has it...? Oooh... Akeno, stop that. That's hardly proper, the way you're doing that. Besides, haven't yours gone up a size?"

"My old bras are a little tight, but they still fit... Then again, I've been thinking it wouldn't be a bad idea to show them off a bit more, to try something that emphasizes their volume. I'm sure you've realized, Rias, how bold a woman can become when she has someone she wants to show her chest to."

"...R-right. Just don't stimulate them too much, okay?"

"I wish mine were as large as yours are, President, Akeno..."

"Oh dear, Asia. But haven't yours already grown a fair amount?"

"R-really...? B-but they're not big enough... At this rate, I'll never get him to like them..."

"They say you can make them grow faster by massaging them. Like this..."

"Eek! N-no! Xenovia! Ah... Oooh... Why hasn't Issei done this to me yet...?"

"Hmm, I see. Unlike mine, yours are very comfortable to the touch. So this is the kind of sensation men like."

"Oh dear, it's nice to be young, isn't it, Rias? Incidentally, I can feel just how much you've grown. It's because you've had Issei do this for you every day, isn't it?"

"Ngh... A-Akeno, cut it out. Get your hands off my chest— Ah! Where did you learn that, Akeno...?!"

"They really do feel nice... Oh-ho. I wonder, if I do this..."

"Ngh... Aah, h-he hasn't done anything like that to me... S-stop it... I want him to be the one to... Ohhh..."

I was getting aroused just listening to them. The number of nosebleeds I was having was off the charts! This was bad! I smacked myself repeatedly on the back of my head, trying to get my nosebleeds under control.

I was reacting to the conversation they were having over there on so many levels...

What I would have done to sneak a peek at them! Had there not been a wall separating the two sections, I would've done so immediately!

If I could only climb over and flutter down to the paradise that awaits on the other side! Dammit! Can't there at least be a peephole?! I screamed internally. Unfortunately, I'd searched for such a spot earlier to no avail...

Better yet, maybe I could use my Sacred Gear to boost the strength of my finger and poke a hole in the wall somewhere...?

"Hey. You want to spy on them, don't you?" Azazel asked with a lecherous grin.

"T-Teach! I-I'm not...!"

"It's fine. There's no problem there, as far as I see it. We're both guys. It's basically a rite of passage to sneak a glimpse of the ladies' pool while you're at a hot spring. Still, it'll only make you a second-rate pervert."

"Second-rate?! Th-then what would be first-rate?"

Azazel paused for a moment as if deep in thought. "...Feeling them in person! If you want to prove yourself as a man, Issei, then you need to aim for mixed bathing!" Azazel then grabbed me by the arm and threw me over his head, up into the air.

Ahhhhh!

All of a sudden, I was floating, the world spinning around me! I was being catapulted through the air!

My body soared away from the men's bathing area, and I locked gazes with the prez below! At this rate—

Splash!

Ouch. I slammed hard into the pool on the girls' side, floundering in the water! When I pulled myself to the surface, I found myself in Shangri-la!

Prez! Akeno! Asia! Xenovia! Koneko! They were all stark naked!

Gah!

Blood shot out my nose again, but could you blame me? In a split second, I had left a bathing house filled with good-for-nothing men and entered a new world of unparalleled feminine beauty!

This was a dream come true! Mixed bathing! It was enough to bring tears to my eyes!

Normally, if this sort of thing were to happen, the girls would have erupted in panic, shouting out things like *Pervert!* or *Lecher!* However, the prez, Akeno, Asia, and Xenovia did nothing to conceal their bodies!

C-cover yourselves! You're young ladies, after all!

"Oh my, Issei. Did Azazel throw you over here? Did you wash properly first?"

"Oh-ho, Issei. You're so daring."

Against all expectations, both the prez and Akeno moved my way with broad grins! Their huge, pale breasts bobbed up and down right before my eyes! Long live tits!

I was transfixed by the sight, unable to move. Akeno caught up to me a moment before the prez could!

"Issei... You're mine now..., " she cooed softly.

Squish...

She embraced me head-on, her figure pressing tightly against mine! It wasn't just her breasts—it was her whole body! Her soft flesh was all but devouring me!

"A-Akeno! I-if you hold on to me like that...!"

The heat from the hot spring water and this erotic situation almost brought my brain to a boil! Ah, damn it all! Why did Akeno's body have to be so amazing?! How did her every stroke feel so good?! The tension and suppleness

were incredible! The water of the bath only made her feel even more delightfully smooth!

Squelch!

I was savoring her delectable flesh when another overpowering sensation assailed my senses!

Rias's face popped up on my shoulder!

P-Prez!

So she was embracing me from behind now?!

I could feel her chest pushing against my back! Ah, her nipples were stimulating my skin! There was no questioning it—those nipples were even more relaxing than a sexy handheld massager!

“Akeno! Let go of my Issei!” the prez insisted, wrapping her arms around my neck and trying to pull me back.

Akeno, however, latched on, squeezing me from the front even tighter! “No way! I’ve decided to enjoy my time at this hot spring together with Issei. It’s so much warmer here in his arms... Just touching his body like this is exhilarating...”

Her grip around me tightened even further! Whoaaaaaaaa! Her breasts were pushing into me so firmly. It almost felt as if they would merge with me! The soft, lethal touch was awesome! I wanted to hug her back, too, to hold her form with my own! But if I did, the prez would see that as a betrayal! She would murder me!

“No! Issei’s body is mine! Who do you think raised him to be like this?! It’s thanks to me that he’s so wonderful to embrace! Everything, from his hair to his toes, is mine! Ngh, I feel so sensitive right now... Is this because of what you did to me earlier...? Or because I’m pressing against Issei...?”

The prez pulled me closer to herself! The sensation of her breasts was coursing through my back! They were so huge, like an all-you-can-eat buffet! And she was breathing erotically into my ear! That lustrous, sexy voice was wreaking havoc on my brain!

Hold on, what did she mean when she said she had raised me?! Was I being

reared as a body pillow for her own private use?! If so, I was overjoyed! She could nurture my sexuality as much as she pleased!

Akeno's breasts were pushing against my chest, and the prez's were squeezing against my back!

Whoaaaaaaa! Awesooooome! The legendary breast sandwich! A paradise in the unknown regions of the underworld! echoed a voice in my mind like the narration of a TV survival program.

Caught in this stimulating vise, I couldn't stop a thick river of red from seeping down my nostrils.

Azazel had been right. Now was my chance to dig my fingers into them! If I pressed those tits like doorbells, would the prez let out a deep, sensual moan? There was only one way to find out!

I—I can do it! I'm going to sink my fingers in those voluptuous mounds! What will the reaction be?! Will my digits disappear?!

"Augh, I want to enjoy the hot spring with him..."

"Just as I thought, it will be next to impossible to steal Issei away from those two. I guess I won't have any choice today but to watch over him from afar."

Asia and Xenovia were murmuring to themselves a short distance away... Unfortunately, the force of this breast sandwich was just too strong, leaving me unable to fully make out what they were saying...

Bah! All of a sudden, I snapped to my senses! Given the intensity of the situation, Koneko should have been calling me *the worst*, or branding me a *sick freak*, or even flying out of nowhere with an overpowered physical punch!

I timidly glanced her way.

She was merely sitting there, her face half-submerged, softly blowing bubbles in the water with a melancholy expression. Perhaps she felt a bit under the weather...?

Suddenly, my vision grew hazy, and I began to lose consciousness. Yep, I knew what was going on. After having lost so much blood through my nose, the heat from the hot spring and the intensity of the boobs pressing against me were

overwhelming my brain. I was quietly drifting away...

“...Ngh... Ugh...”

Amid unparalleled joy, it felt like my spirit was departing through my open mouth.

“Issei!” Rias and Akeno called out in flustered unison.

Ah, but I was so happy... So very happy...

Matsuda, Motohama, paradise is here in Hell.

Was this what the saying “To meet a Buddha in the depths of Hell” meant...?

When I saw them next, I would have to relate the sensual wonders of a breast sandwich to their ignorant ears...

And so I slipped into darkness.



We gathered the next day in a corner of the vast garden of the main Gremory estate.

We were all wearing tracksuits, even Azazel! It was time for our pre-training meeting around a large outdoor table.

The hot spring last night had been incredible! I would never forget it! The excitement had left me in a bad way, but I still hadn’t been able to wipe the grin from my face! If things like this could happen here, everyone should visit the underworld at least once in their lives!

Still, I needed to change my mindset for what we had in store today.

Azazel was holding a set of documents filled with what looked like an excessive amount of data.

“Let me get this out of the way first. This training regimen is meant to lay the groundwork for the future. Some of you may have immediate results, but others shouldn’t expect to see anything in the short term. That said, you’re all still growing. So long as you don’t screw up along the way, you should all make good progress.” He paused there before turning to the prez. “Let’s start with you, Rias. You’ve always had high-level talent, physical specs, and demonic powers at your disposal. You can expect those abilities to keep improving even

if you keep going about your life as you have been. You'll probably be a candidate for a high-class demon ranking of your own by the time you reach adulthood. However, I'm guessing you want to get stronger *now*, not some unknown time in the future, right?"

The prez nodded vigorously in agreement. "Yes. I never want to lose again."

Right on! I didn't want to lose another match, either! Even if it wasn't an official one!

"In that case, follow the schedule I've set out here to the letter, right up to the day of the Rating Game," Azazel instructed, passing her a sheet of paper.

The prez tilted her head in consternation. "...This doesn't look like a particularly involved regimen, though."

"That's because it isn't. It's just simple exercise. That's all you need. In your case, everything's interrelated, so if you want to increase your overall strength, all you're going to have to do is basic practice. The problem is the essential characteristics of a King. Over time, most Kings come to favor brains over brawn.

"I'm sure you're aware there are some demons who lack magical strength and power, yet have still managed to rise to the top thanks to their knowledge and quick thinking. Well, your real task is to learn all there is to know about the Rating Game. That includes recordings of previous matches, all the data you can gather, everything. Drill it into your memory. A King needs to be sharp-witted and resourceful. They must be able to respond to any situation. It's your job to make the best use of your servants. And remember this: You never know what a match will have in store until it rolls around. The same goes for a battlefield, too."

Whoa...

Azazel might have usually been one to fool about, but it looked like he had genuinely thought this through.

Yep, that was a convincing argument, all right. The prez and the rest of us would have no choice but to put his advice into practice.

"Next up, Akeno," Azazel called out.

“...Yes,” she responded sullenly. She always seemed to be uncomfortable around the fallen angel, and she’d even once said she disliked him. Was it because of who her father was?

Surprisingly, Azazel brought up that very thing.

“You’ve got to learn to accept the blood that flows through your veins.”

“—!” Akeno frowned, probably at the bluntness of his remark.

Azazel, however, paid her no heed. “I took a look at the recording of your match against Phenex and his brood. What the hell was that? With your specs, you should have been able to trounce the enemy Queen. Why didn’t you use your fallen angel powers? There’s only so much you can do with regular lightning. If you don’t make use of your light abilities to make holy lightning, you’ll never be able to reach your full potential.”

So that was it. Akeno was the daughter of a fallen angel, so it made sense that she could use their light attacks. And those powers were super effective against demons. If she could combine that with her usual magic, she would be all but unstoppable!

“...I don’t need to rely on that kind of power,” she muttered, her expression conflicted.

“Don’t deny what you are. If you can’t even accept yourself, how can you expect anyone else to accept you? In the end, the *sole* thing you can rely on is your own strength and power. Refusing them only serves to weaken you. You’ve got to come to grips with yourself, no matter how hard or painful it might be. Your greatest weakness is your current mindset. And I want you to get over it before the match. If you don’t, you’ll be nothing more than a hindrance in future Rating Games. The Vestal of Thunder needs to become the Vestal of Holy Lightning.”

“...” Akeno said nothing in response to Azazel’s admonition, but she had probably realized he was right.

I believe in you, Akeno! You can break down this barrier!

“Your turn, Kiba.”

“Yes.”

“I want you to keep up your Balance Breaker state for a full day. You’ve got to get used to it, especially in battle situations. So your goal is to keep maintaining it for as long as possible. After that, basic training like what Rias is doing should be enough. I’ll see that you’re instructed in one-on-one in sword-type Sacred Gears later.”

Azazel was saying that when it came to Sacred Gears, it was best to talk to an expert. Given his obsession with the things, I thought he was talking about himself. I still didn’t get what was so interesting about them, however.

“As for your swordsmanship... You were going to train under your old master again, weren’t you?”

“Yes. I plan to start over again from the beginning.”

Oh, so Kiba had a sword master, did he? Whoever it was, they would have to be pretty strong.

Kiba wasn’t the kind to joke around about things like this, so he must have been serious when he said he would reevaluate his entire technique from the ground up. Was he hoping to become even stronger?

“Next, Xenovia. You’re going to get a better grip on the Durendal—and another Holy Sword, too.”

“Another Holy Sword?” she repeated, tilting her head.

“Yeah, a special one,” Azazel said with a smirk before turning his gaze to Gasper. “Your turn.”

“O-okaaaaaay!” Our resident shut-in recoiled in terror. This whole trip must have been particularly hard on him. Everywhere we went, he saw unfamiliar faces.

“Quit squirming. Your greatest handicap is that fearful attitude of yours. You’ve got to fortify your mind and body to resist it. Your vampire heritage and Sacred Gear give you unusually high capabilities. I’ve put together my very own recluse recovery plan for you, so I want you to focus on developing the right mental attitude. Even if you can’t show your face in public, we want to get to a

point where it doesn't dull your movements in battle."

Azazel was 100 percent on the mark there. If Gasper couldn't overcome his phobia, he'd never grow and progress. The bracelet Azazel had given him to stabilize his powers wasn't good for his body if used for too long, so he was only employing it when the situation demanded. His time-stopping ability hadn't caused any incidents lately, but I was still concerned.

"Yarrrrrrgh! I'll go for broke!"

That only made me feel even more uneasy... The last thing we needed was for him to end up busted. He already looked ready to crawl back into his cardboard box again...

"Next up, the other Bishop, Asia."

"Y-yes!" Asia was raring to go as well. She had often admitted to me that she was afraid she wouldn't be of much use to everyone in combat.

But that wasn't true. Her healing ability was nothing short of astounding. If not for her, we would have been trapped in countless dangerous situations. She should have taken confidence from her unique skills.

"You're going to have to do some basic training to boost your physical and demonic abilities. From there, your main job will be to strengthen your Sacred Gear."

"Isn't her Sacred Gear already incredibly powerful, though?" I asked. "She can heal anything but disease or stamina with just a touch."

What higher level was there for her to reach? She could all but bring back the dead in a flash.

"I'm aware of that. There's nothing wrong with her healing speed. The problem is the whole touching part. She can't help an injured ally if she can't get close to them," replied Azazel.

I felt like I understood what he was getting at.

"Can Asia expand the range of her Sacred Gear?" The prez posed the very question that was on my mind.

Azazel nodded. "You've hit the mark, Rias. It's a bit of a secret trick—you

could call it a cheat—but if you want to maximize the Twilight Healing, increasing its effective range is the top priority.”

“So can it be used across long distances, too?!” I questioned, astonished. If so, it was even more incredible than I had first thought!

Azazel nodded. “Based on the data my organization has gathered, it should theoretically be possible for Asia to release the Sacred Gear’s aura to heal all allies around her simultaneously.”

Seriously?! If that was true, then Asia’s role on the battlefield would be paramount! She wouldn’t have to worry about chasing after us one by one, saving everyone a tremendous amount of time! It would give us infinitely more opportunities to counterattack!

Just how extensive was Azazel’s database on Sacred Gears? Did he really know how they all worked?

“The drawback is that this will heal enemies as well. It would be good if we could find a way to discern between friend and foe... But then we’ve got your personality to worry about,” remarked Azazel.

“...What’s wrong with her personality?” I demanded.

The fallen angel’s expression was stern. “She’s kindhearted by nature. When she sees an injured opponent, she’ll no doubt instinctively want to heal them, too. That sentiment will get in the way of the Sacred Gear’s ability to distinguish between teammate and opponent. She might never be able to discern the two this way. So that ranged healing technique I just mentioned could wind up being a double-edged sword. Still, it’s something we should make sure Asia can pull off.”

In other words, if Asia couldn’t control that ranged healing technique, she’d restore enemies, too. And to think it was her kindness that was at fault for that... The Sacred Gear system was just too cruel sometimes...

“That’s why I’ve sought out another possibility—launching her healing aura.”

“D-do you mean I can send my powers to someone nearby?” Asia asked, making a cute flying gesture.

“Yeah, you should be able to hurl it at a direct target. Say Issei was ten meters away from you, badly injured. You could focus your power and cast it at him. If we consider that first technique I mentioned to be like a field, think of this one as closer to tossing a ball. You won’t need to touch someone directly to help them.”

A remote healing ability! Hey, come on now, that sounded amazing!

“Th-that’s great! Asia, you’ll be able to aid everyone!” I took her hands in my own, shaking them up and down in excitement.

She looked remarkably pleased by this unexpected revelation, too.

“It won’t be as powerful as physical contact, but having the option is a strategic advantage nonetheless. With one or two people leading in the vanguard and someone to protect Asia in the rear, you’ll be able to assemble an ideal formation.”

So Azazel was even dreaming up team compositions now? He must really have spent a lot of time on this.

The prez nodded in agreement. “It’s a simple approach, but most strong tactical arrangements are. For most Familias, the only healing techniques available are items like Phoenix Tears or special recovery potions. Asia’s Sacred Gear is far more versatile and reliable than any of those.”

“Exactly. You could even say Asia’s Sacred Gear is your team’s defining characteristic. Anyway, aside from working on those new techniques, you should improve your physical capabilities. Make sure you don’t skimp on your basic training, got it?”

Asia nodded her head deeply at Azazel’s instructions. “Y-yes! I’ll do my best!”

You can do it, Asia! I’ll be your shield! I’ll protect you! There was no way I would let anyone so much as lay a finger on my little sister’s pearl-white skin!

“You’re up, Koneko.”

“...All right.” Koneko looked...strangely excited.

What was going on? She’d been so gloomy recently, but today, she was unusually upbeat. What was happening inside her head?

“You’ve got all the essential qualities of a Rook, including a faultless defense and offense. No, there’s nothing wrong with your physical abilities... But there are stronger offensive fighters in this Familia than you,” Azazel stated matter-of-factly.

“...I know,” she said with a look of frustration.

Did that perhaps bother her? But she was already head and shoulders more powerful than me. I thought her capable of besting Kiba or even Akeno if she wanted.

“This Familia’s best attackers at present are Kiba, with his Balance Breaker Holy Demon Sword, and Xenovia, with her Holy Sword, the Durendal. Both are formidable weapons. And if we can get Issei to unlock his Balance Breaker properly as well...”

I wasn’t going to contest that Kiba and Xenovia were superior in matters of offense. They definitely outclassed me.

Truthfully, I didn’t even know whether I would be able to properly unlock my Balance Breaker.

“Koneko, I want you to focus on polishing your essential skills with the others, and on exposing what you’ve sealed within you, too, just like Akeno. If you don’t accept yourself, you’ll never be able to grow.”

“...” Koneko gave no response. The second Azazel had said the word *expose*, her fighting fervor suddenly evaporated.

What kind of power are we talking about here? What does she have that needs revealing?

“Don’t worry. Knowing you, Koneko, you’ll be able to pull through this in a heartbeat,” I encouraged casually, patting her on the head.

But she quickly brushed my hand away. “Don’t make light of this...”

What a stern expression. I had never seen her look so harsh before. Had I just stepped on a land mine? I’d only been trying to encourage her, but it looked my words had the opposite effect...

With the atmosphere suddenly tense, Azazel glanced at his watch.

“Now then, the last one up—Issei... Hold on a second. He should be here soon...” The fallen angel paused there, glancing up at the sky.

Huh? What exactly am I supposed to wait for? Hold on, is something coming?

We all looked upward. At first, it didn't seem like there was anything there, but then the next moment, a huge shadow appeared overhead! It was bearing down toward us with extreme speed!

Whoa! It's massive! Could it be some kind of monster? A creature? A spirit? Are we under attack?! My thoughts were racing.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The earth shook as it landed directly in front of us. The force of the impact was so great that it threw me from my chair, flat to the ground!

When the dust settled, there was a huge figure standing before us.

It must have been at least fifteen meters high! The creature possessed an enormous gaping maw lined with razor-sharp fangs, muscular legs and feet, and broad, mighty wings!

I knew what this was. I had seen its like countless times before. A similar creature dwelled within me.

“A dragon!” I exclaimed.

Azazel nodded. “Spot-on, Issei. This guy right here is a dragon.”

I knew it! I was staring at a real-life *kaiju*! It wasn't going to burn me alive with its fiery breath, was it?! It looked capable of laying the whole estate to waste if it wanted!

“Azazel, what makes you think you can trespass in demon territory with impunity?” the dragon questioned, its mouth twisting as it formed the words.

Whoa, so it can talk!

“Ha! I'm here fair and square! I got permission straight from the Demon King himself! You got a problem with that, Tannin?”

By the way that they were addressing each other, Azazel seemed to know this dragon.

“Hmph. Very well. I’m only here because Sirzechs asked me as a favor. Don’t forget that, fallen angel governor.”

“Heh-heh... You get all that, Issei? This guy will be your teacher,” Azazel said to me, pointing at the huge creature.

...

Hold on a second there, Teach... Huh? Huh?!

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! This huge dragon?!”

My eyes all but shot out of their sockets in shock! Was he serious here?! This massive beast was going to teach me?!

I thought you were going to instruct me, Teach! What gives?!

“It’s been a long time, Ddraig. I’m guessing you can hear me in there,” the dragon called out to me—or strictly speaking, to the entity that resided within me.

At that moment, my left arm began to glow red of its own accord, my Boosted Gear activating.

“Ah, it’s good to hear a familiar voice, Tannin,” Ddraig responded so that everyone could hear, his voice booming out from the glowing jewel embedded in my gauntlet.

“Do you know this creature?” I demanded.

“Yeah. Do you remember how I told you about the Five Great Dragon Kings? Tannin here used to be one of them, back when they were the Six Great Dragon Kings. You might have seen his name in the Bible. This is him.”

Oh, a Dragon King..., I recalled. Ddraig had mentioned that one of them might come after me someday. Scary stuff. Did that mean this huge guy here had set me in his sights? Uh-oh... I’d had enough of dragons. I didn’t want to meet any more of them! Vali was enough to handle by himself! At this rate, I was going to get killed before I could ever build my harem!

“Tannin was reincarnated as a demon, so the Six Great Dragon Kings became five. He’s now an ultimate-class demon, one of the strongest around,” Azazel stated.

So this dragon was a demon?! Dragons could be reborn, too?! Heh, that must have been one massive boon for whoever managed such a trick. If he was an ultimate-class demon, did that mean he surpassed the prez?

From my perspective standing before him, he certainly seemed to be. It was good to know that even reincarnated demons could climb to the top!

“Tannin, the Blaze Meteor Dragon,” Azazel said by way of introduction. “The strength of his fiery breath is said to be on par with the power of a meteorite impact. He’s one of the few legendary dragons still alive today. Sorry about this, Tannin, but can you look after the Red Dragon Emperor kid for a while? I need you to teach him how to use his powers, but he’s going to have to learn everything from scratch.”

Hold on, so I’m going to learn the ropes from a guy whose attacks are as strong as a falling star?! Is that really okay?! I mean, he’s not gonna kill me, right?

Tannin let out a resigned sigh at this request. “Wouldn’t it be easiest to get Ddraig to teach him directly? You don’t need me.”

“There are limits to going down that path. No, he needs a real dragon to instruct him, otherwise—”

“You want *real* dragon combat? I see. So you’re saying you want me to pick on this boy.”

Hey, hey! “Pick on” me?! If a huge monster like Tannin decided to mess with me, I was done for!

“I’ve never trained one of Ddraig’s vessels...,” Tannin remarked happily, narrowing his eyes and breaking into a grin.

H-he’s going to kill me! There was no way I’d be able to survive a training bout with a monster like him! I was basically as weak as any old human! I couldn’t do this!

“Go easy on him, Tannin. My host is more pathetic than you can possibly imagine.”

Thank you, Ddraig! You truly are a wonderful partner!

“Oh, he won’t die. Leave it to me.”

I’m doomed! No way am I going to survive this! That old dragon geezer just doesn’t understand!

Standing beside me, Azazel nodded in agreement.

Don’t just go along with this! I screamed internally. *Can’t you see this is way beyond what I can handle?!*

“We need him ready in around twenty days, human time. Ideally, I’d like him to be able to use his Balance Breaker by then. Okay, then. Hang in there, Issei. Try not to bite the dust.” With that, Azazel waved farewell and turned to leave.

That fallen angel bastard was actually leaving me to perish!

“Now then, we all have our own training regimens. Let’s get started,” the prez said. She had forgotten all about me!

“Understood,” the others responded in unison as they stood up and went their separate ways.

What?! Huh?! So that’s it?! Does no one have any qualms about sending me to train with a real-life dragon?! No matter how you look at this, he’s going to attack me! He could end up killing me!

The prez looked my way and gave me a thumbs-up. “Hang in there, Issei.”

My master was uncompromising when it came to training. Although she normally doted on me, when it came to this stuff, Rias was truly demonic.

“Lady Rias, can I use that mountain over there? That’s where I want to take the kid,” Tannin inquired, pointing toward a peak far off on the horizon.

“Of course. Train him well.”

“Leave him to me. I’ll hone him to the precipice of life and death.”

Whaaaaat?! You essentially just let that monster pick my grave!

Tannin grabbed me in his massive claw and took off into the air! We were flying! I had been snatched by a dragon! He was going to eat me for sure!

“Preeeeeee!” I cried in desperation, but Rias merely waved back to me with a smile from down below.

Grandpa. You're up there in Heaven, right? Somehow, I've been kidnapped by a monster who's carrying me across the sky. It's the summer of my second year of high school. The first page in the most crucial time of my youth... And I'm going to have to spend it with a dragon on a lonely mountain.

This place really was hell. Heaven, where my grandpa was supposed to be, had never felt farther away.



My long-awaited summer vacation.

At the beginning of the year, Matsuda, Motohama, and I had each vowed that we would find girlfriends and have a raunchy rose-colored break. Where had I taken a misstep to end up being set on fire atop an ungodly peak?

Kabooooom!

Trees were sent flying, rocks fell around me, and a huge crater blasted into the ground beneath my feet.

“Whaaaaa—?!”

I desperately raced to dodge Tannin's lethal breath attack! Damn that old geezer!

Even after I thought my eyes had run dry, tears still coursed down my cheeks! Each day was terror from start to finish! I wasn't sure I could keep going on like this! What kind of high school student had to put up with dodging scorching fireballs from a dragon for hours on end?!

“Come on, Red Dragon Kiddo. If you don't pick up the pace, I'll reduce you to ash!”

Argh! I can't turn to dust until I've had sex with the prez! I'm supposed to take her virginity! I have to give her my chastity, too!

And I wanted to have some sexy times with Akeno, too! I wanted her maidenhood for my own! Plus, I was supposed to make babies with Xenovia! I had to get closer with Asia as well!

There was so much I had left to do! So why was I wasting time battling death out in the middle of nowhere?!

We had been here for a few days now, and in that time, I had been reduced to a total wreck.

I couldn't recall a time I'd ever been so exhausted, both mentally and physically. I mean, I was being chased around by this monster morning and night. On the rare occasion that I tried to launch a counterattack, it was never enough to turn the tables. Whenever I attempted to strike at those thick dragon scales, I only succeeded in hurting my own fists!

Even my power-transferring ability had proved pointless, and so I spent the time running and hiding. Anything less meant being roasted!

Tannin's fire attacks were powerful enough to blow away chunks of the mountain in a single hit! If I took a direct blow, it meant instant death!

Ever since I had offered my left arm in payment for using my Balance Breaker during my battle with Riser Phenex, whenever the amount of dragon power within me passed a certain threshold, my arm transformed into a dragon's claw. Fortunately, thanks to the bracelet-like item I had received from Azazel, I was able to keep my limb in its original form. That fallen angel knew how to make all sorts of things.

That said, it only worked in the underworld. When I returned to the human realm, I would need to get the prez or Akeno to suck out the dragon power through my fingers again!

Despite how miserable it was, all this running was great exercise. So far, I had managed to avoid taking a head-on strike from that dragon breath, but my tracksuit was in tatters and full of holes.

Once my daily sparring was over with, it was time for basic training. It was mostly strength drills, and by the time we were finished, my whole body was screaming in agony. Still, it was better than being chased around by a grumpy old dragon, and I fared much better at it.

I had to make my own meals. As I was unfamiliar with the plants and animals of the underworld, I would only eat something that Tannin confirmed was safe. This meant I subsisted on fish I caught in the river and nuts I gathered from trees on the mountain.

At some point, I even worked out how to light a fire with my demon powers. Yup, my skills were improving.

My life had definitely taken a serious turn, however. Whenever I caught a fish, I would cry out with joy like a castaway on a deserted island. It was bad. I was turning into a feral child.

That was how I had been passing the past few days. Oh, how I wanted to see the prez! And talk with Asia! And drink tea with Akeno!

There were no girls here! I couldn't think of a worse hell! How I longed for a lap pillow from the prez! What I would have given to feel her thighs again!

The only pleasures I had been able to enjoy since coming here were my delusions.

Once the old dragon geezer was finished with me for the day, I would retreat into my dream world, where the prez and Asia would welcome me with open arms...

Lately, I found myself fantasizing about them even while being chased down by Tannin. It was messed up.

Booooooooooom!

Another fireball raced toward me, destroying the boulder I'd been hiding behind! Tannin had found me.

"There you are. It's no use only running. Fight back."

"I can't! You're too strong! You're even stronger than Vali, aren't you?!"

"Well, folks often say I rival the Demon Kings in terms of power."

See! He was a genuine monster! That bastard was Demon King-class! Why did I have to rough it like some survivalist in the mountains with an overpowered dragon?!

Dammit! I should've spent summer break at the beach with Matsuda and Motohama!

I wanted women! I might have been surrounded by lovely beauties, but I had yet to unlock even a single erotic scene with one!

Ah, if only the prez or Akeno would agree to become my girlfriend. Maybe I should throw caution to the wind and confess my love to them? But I couldn't help but worry they wouldn't accept such a declaration...

Although I was taken aback because I couldn't stop myself from having dirty delusions while running from the geezer dragon, I wouldn't have been able to cope with my present situation if not for those fantasies!

"Oh, so you're going at it? How's he keeping up?" came a familiar voice.

When I glanced around, I spied the governor of the fallen angels.

"Delicious! Awesooooome!"

I rabidly devoured the prez's handmade rice balls. She'd requested Azazel bring them to me.

Awesome! These are Rias's handiwork, all right! A token of her love! Asia had made me a boxed lunch, too, which was equally fantastic!

"Akeno also prepared you a meal. You should eat that one as well. She was practically competing with Rias when she made it. Ha-ha-ha. I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder!" Azazel remarked, clapping me on the shoulder.

"Quit messing around! I'm close to dying here! This dragon guy is superstrong! Sparring with someone powerful is fine, but he's going all out!" I exclaimed while stuffing my mouth with rice.

It was all just too hard! A kid used to a life of modern luxury like me couldn't keep up fighting against a Demon King-class opponent alone on a mountaintop! More importantly, I didn't even have the prez's breasts to sustain me!

"That geezer Tannin doesn't know how to hold back! He's going to be my death! I'll expire without ever having lost my virginity!"

"Don't be a fool. Are you truly going to let that happen so easily? If I felt like it, I could reduce you to ash in a single breath. The way to end this is simple: Use your Balance Breaker," Tannin insisted, his nostrils flaring.

"That's easy enough for you to say! You're the size of a monster! I'm practically a speck of dust compared to you!"

“Hmph. And you call yourself the mightiest of Lady Rias’s Pawns? Don’t make me laugh. Do you realize how many demons would kill to serve your master?”

The prez was undoubtedly a celebrity here in the underworld. That outrageous reception for her at the train station had confirmed as much.

As I thought about it, I realized it was likely true that many demons longed to serve her. I was pretty lucky in that respect.



Yep, it was a stroke of good fortune that I got to live with a wonderful, kind, and buxom beauty.

Ah, my beloved Prez... I wanted to marry her one day, but that was an impossibly distant dream. I breathed a sigh.

Azazel looked over my training records. “You’ve been doing your basic training, too, right? Good. If you don’t keep up with it, you won’t be able to hone your body to the level necessary to reach your Balance Breaker. You still lack in a lot of areas. Your demon powers are no match for Vali, so you’ve got no choice but to increase your strength.”

He was right, of course. Vali was descended from a former Demon King. As far as demon powers were concerned, he was untouchable. As for whether I could best him through brute strength... Well, there was a vast gulf between his raw stats and mine.

“Um, back when I was fighting him, Vali looked like he was about to do something big. What was that?” I asked Azazel.

Whatever it was, he’d been moments away from unleashing *something*. Albion had even tried to keep him from doing it.

“Ah, you mean his Juggernaut Drive?”

“Is that like an even more powerful Balance Breaker or something?”

“No, there’s nothing more powerful than a Balance Breaker; it is a Sacred Gear’s ultimate form. However, some Sacred Gears are made by sealing certain magical entities within them, and they have their own unique restraints. Your Boosted Gear and Vali’s Divine Dividing are both examples of that.”

The might of our Sacred Gears came from the beings sealed inside them. In other words, our dragons.

“Those entities are firmly sealed, but their abilities can be fully tapped into if their vessels know how to use them. In the case of the Red and White Dragon Emperors, to unleash those sealed powers is to unleash your Juggernaut Drive. Doing so would grant you a level of strength comparable to a god, though at immense risk. It would greatly diminish your life span and deprive you of any

sense of reason.”

“So you’re saying it would make us go berserk?”

“Yeah. You could end up destroying everything, including yourself. Mastering that much power is virtually impossible. I’d guess that Vali would only be able to handle it for a few minutes. Given Albion’s reluctance, he still would’ve been in extreme danger. Perhaps I’m not one to talk, considering I push my artificial Sacred Gears into burst states, but sacrificing your life span to get more out of a Sacred Gear is wrong. It’s an accursed fighting style that can only be used by those who are as good as dead. You’d do well never to try such a thing.”

There was evident sorrow in Azazel’s eyes. Could it be that he was worried about Vali? He had been his teacher for a time.

“Hmm. So the current White Dragon Emperor can handle his Juggernaut Drive? That’s a problem. If you don’t catch up quick, Red Dragon Kiddo, he’ll kill you. In the past, the first of the Two Heavenly Dragons to awake their Juggernaut Drive has always been victorious over the other. You could say the early bird gets the worm,” Tannin said.

Did that mean it was my turn to bite the big one?! But I couldn’t die yet! I still hadn’t fulfilled my dreams! My harem! Getting promoted to the level of a high-class demon! Heck, I wanted to become an ultimate-class demon, like Tannin! Simply learning that such a feat was possible was a huge deal!

The only way I’d see any of my aspirations achieved was if I continued training, but could I keep this up?

Tannin was beyond powerful. I couldn’t hope to win against him. He was a literal monster! I mean, his breath was fire! I wasn’t some superhero who could shoot laser beams out of his hands! There was no comparing us!

“On a different topic, Issei...,” Azazel began, his tone of voice suddenly turning formal.

“Yes?”

“What do you think about Akeno?”

Uh, *that* came out of nowhere. What exactly did he mean?

“She’s a good senior,” I replied honestly.

Sure, she could be a little sadistic at times, but she was usually so kind, and the way she acted so pure now and then was incredibly cute.

“That isn’t what I mean. As a woman,” Azazel pressed.

“She’s amazing! The kind of person I’d want for a girlfriend!”

Azazel nodded at my unflinching response, seemingly relieved. “I see. You know, part of my job is to watch over her for a buddy of mine.”

“You mean her father? He’s a subordinate of yours, right?”

“Baraqiel is more like an old comrade, similar to Shemhazai. A buddy. We got up to a whole lot of crazy stuff back in the day. But while I was off having fun, everyone got hitched and started having kids.” He let out a deep sigh.

Was Azazel worried about still being single?

“Are you upset that they beat you to the punch?” I questioned.

“...That isn’t it. I’ve got plenty of women.”

Despite his words, the fallen angel had a distant look on his face for a moment. Had I said something I shouldn’t have?

“The point is, I’m concerned about Akeno. But I guess both she and Baraqiel would probably say I’m sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“You’re a bit of a busybody, aren’t you, Teach? You’re even going out of your way to train us all.”

“I’m just a fallen angel with too much free time... It’s my fault the White Dragon Emperor is as strong as he is.”

Personally, I didn’t fault Azazel for that. You couldn’t deny that he was undoubtedly a meddler, though, especially when it came to me, Akeno, and Vali. He had gone to great lengths for each of us. I didn’t know too many of them, but I was sure Azazel was a rare sort of fallen angel. How had he managed to become the leader of his faction?

“Anyway, I think I can leave Akeno to you,” Azazel finally admitted.

“Leave her...to me?”

What exactly was that supposed to mean? Did he want me to protect her in the Rating Game and in future battles? I had no objections to that. Part of a Pawn's job was to guard their Queen.

"You aren't the sharpest tool in the shed, but you're a good kid. A lovable fool, you could say. Most importantly, you don't hold her heritage against her."

"I'm not entirely sure what you're talking about..."

"Ha-ha-ha, that's precisely what I'm getting at. If you let her wrap you around her little finger, we'd be in serious trouble. Screw this up, and it'll affect your future prospects. And that's not to mention the bloodshed. People like you are good at winning the trust of those around you, so in the end, no one will resent you. That's a unique privilege, or maybe a special talent."

"...?"

My brain was full of unformed questions, but I knew one thing for sure. "Got it. I'll protect her! I'll look out for the prez, too, and Asia as well!"

"Good. I'll leave Akeno to you, then. The other problem...is what to do with Koneko."

"What about Koneko?"

Azazel let out another sigh. "What indeed. She's in a hurry, perhaps—or it might be she's questioning her abilities..."

Memories of Koneko's odd behavior the past few days suddenly surfaced in my mind. She'd looked so gloomy. What had been troubling her?

"She pushed herself too hard with the training I gave her and collapsed this morning."

"Sh-she collapsed?! Konekooooo!" I blurted in alarm at this news.

This was serious! I hoped she was okay!

"Asia can heal physical injuries, but she can't do anything about someone's inner strength. Pushing oneself too hard is ultimately counterproductive. Especially so when we have limited time before your match."

"U-um, in that case, what about me...? I'm getting chased around this

mountain by a dragon... Aren't I overdoing it a little, too?" I asked, pointing toward my face.

No matter how you looked at it, this kind of exercise was inhumane!

"Nah, you're fine. You're nowhere near your limits yet," Azazel retorted dismissively.

Huh?! Don't I matter?! What did I do to deserve this kind of treatment?!

"We should probably get going, Issei. I've been told to bring you back to the main Gremory residence for a bit. Sorry, Tannin. The kid's coming with me today. I'll have him back by tomorrow morning," Azazel said.

"Very well. I'll return to my own territory for a short while, then," my draconian teacher replied.

I'd thought I wasn't allowed to leave the mountain. Apparently, that wasn't true.

"Um? Who ordered me to come back? The prez?" I inquired.

"...Her mother," answered Azazel.

The prez's mother...?! What on earth could she want with me?



"Yes, turn there. No, that's no good. You need to move faster. Look, Issei. Don't just stand there. Let's start again from the top."

I was in one of the rooms in an annex building near the Gremory estate, doing my best at a dance rehearsal with Rias's mother.

What am I doing here?

After Azazel had dropped me off, Venelana had led me straight here. Before I'd even had a chance to wonder what was happening, we'd started to practice. Never having danced in my life, it was a complete disaster.

Rias's mother was wearing a dress, as she had been the previous times I had seen her. She was practically glued to me as we went through the steps! Now and then, I would brush up against her voluptuous breasts. They were wonderfully soft! I'm not sure how best to put this, but they had what felt like a mature elasticity and texture! I didn't quite understand the intricacies, but that

was how they felt! In appearance, they were just like the prez's. It was clear where Rias had inherited hers from!

Seriously, Venelana was incredibly cute. I mean, appearance-wise, she looked to be no older than I was. Plus, she had the same facial features as my beloved Prez! I couldn't help myself! This was a flaxen-haired Rias! Better yet, the woman possessed her daughter's sense of style! Did I mention that her tits were huge? Thank you, Mom! Thanks for passing your marvelous genes on to Rias!

"Let's take a short break," Venelana said, pausing there.

I took a seat, trying to catch my breath.

My whole morning had been running for my life from Tannin; I was exhausted. Still, dance practice sure beat being dodging that monstrous old geezer's fireballs.

The respite was actually the perfect chance to ask Venelana something I'd been wondering.

"U-um...", I began clumsily.

"What is it?"

"Why am I the only one doing this...? Why not Kiba or Gasper?"

The same went for the special tutoring I had been receiving. If they wanted to turn me into a gentleman, then why were the other guys in our Familia exempt? Look, I wasn't going to deny that I was the least refined of all of us, but still...

"As one would expect of a Knight, Yuuto Kiba has already mastered these skills," the prez's mother responded. "And for his part, Gasper is a member of a distinguished vampire family. His behavior may be somewhat questionable, but he understands the basics of etiquette. That leaves you, Issei, as the problem. Seeing as you hail from common stock in the human realm, your behavior is unsurprising, but it will be an issue here if you can't cultivate your manners. You will be expected to engage in social events together with Rias before long, so you must learn as many of our customs during your stay here as possible."

Venelana's explanation left me speechless! I had to make appearances?! I'd

thought servants weren't supposed to draw attention to themselves!

"Th-the prez and I...will be mingling in high-class social circles?!" I balked at the very idea of what she was suggesting.

Venelana quickly shifted her gaze, covering her mouth with her hand. "...Oops, I've said too much. It's still too early for that discussion, yes? Putting that aside, you will have to stop calling her 'Prez.' You are not at school, so you must address your master by her name. Not to mention that Rias is— Oh, I almost overstepped my boundary again."

What's wrong with calling her Prez? I wondered.

"I've called her that for so long, it's basically automatic... Hmm, what about Lady Rias? Or Ma'am?"

"That's better. Master would work just as well, too. However, you will need to use a different title in private."

"Is Prez no good there?"

"Think. Do you want her to despise you? If you can't figure that much out for yourself, then there's no hope for you," Venelana stated with a chuckle.

Uh-oh! That was the last thing I wanted!

"Hmm, I suppose both of you would feel awkward if you suddenly started calling her something different. I'll allow you to refer to her as President for this trip only. Just remember that you will need to start addressing Rias properly in the future."

All this talk of Rias got me wondering what she was up to right now.

Was she taking care of Koneko? I was worried about her, too, actually. Koneko was my underclassman, so I would have liked to check in on her. There was no telling whether she'd appreciate my showing her concern, though...

"Um, can I ask you another question?"

"What is it?"

"Is Koneko okay?"

"Oh yes. That's no more than a case of overexertion. She should recover with

a couple of days' rest," assured Venelana.

"...I've been worried about her lately. She's been acting strangely since before we came to the underworld..."

"The girl must be wrestling with how to face her own powers and identity. It's a difficult situation she finds herself in, but the answer is something she must find on her own."

"...‘Her own powers and identity’?" I repeated.

What exactly does that mean?

"Now that you mention it, you haven't been a part of Rias's Familia for very long, have you? Yes, it's no wonder you haven't heard. Then allow me to fill you in."

The prez's mother sat down across from me and recounted a story of two cats—sisters.

The siblings were inseparable. They slept together, ate together, and played together. Bereaved of their parents, with no home of their own to return to and no one to rely on, they counted on each other to survive.

"One day, a demon picked up the two young cats. The older of the two was made a member of the demon's Familia, while the younger was permitted to live alongside them. It seemed they'd finally found a way to live a decent and peaceful life."

But then, according to Rias's mother, something unusual occurred. The older sister's powers continued to grow at an alarming rate, unlocking previously unseen abilities. Those powers only blossomed after the cat had been made into a demon.

"Those feline siblings were originally from a race that excels in sorcery connected to phantoms and supernatural creatures. On top of that, the older sister developed an aptitude for a form of hermetic magic that only a select few ancient sages could achieve."

Before long, the older sibling surpassed even her master in power. She was consumed by her abilities, morphing into an evil being that existed for blood

and battle.

“Her strength continuously growing stronger, the cat slew her own master and became a stray—one of the most dangerous strays of all time. She destroyed every pursuit squad that was sent to dispatch her.”

Faced with no alternative, the demon leadership chose to call off their hunt temporarily.

“The younger sister was left behind, and she was held responsible for the destruction.”

Apparently, people thought she’d go on a rampage one day, too.

“It was decided to put down the younger sister, and that’s when Sirzechs stepped in. He convinced his fellow high-class demons that she was innocent. This resulted in him being made responsible for the younger sister.”

Despite escaping death, her sibling’s betrayal and the merciless persecution from other demons left the younger cat’s spirit on the verge of collapse. It was a truly heartbreaking story.

“After the cat had lost her innocent smile and will to live, Sirzechs entrusted her to his younger sister. Once she met Rias, that little feline began to regain her emotions little by little. Rias eventually named her Koneko.”

Venelana’s story was about Koneko’s past. I had no words.

In that case, Koneko’s really a—

“She’s a former *youkai*, a supernatural shapeshifter. Have you ever heard of a *nekomata*, the mythical two-tailed monster cat? She is the sole remaining descendent of the strongest form of *nekomata*, a *nekoshou*, with unparalleled skills not only in supernatural magic but also hermetic sorcery.”



“Ah, Prez.”

“Issei!”

After I finished my dance practice, I made my way to the main estate, where Rias greeted me. She’d popped up out of nowhere, embracing me in a warm hug! Ah, it felt like ages since she’d last done this... We’d only been apart for a

few days, but I'd missed the scent of her hair!

"...Issei's smell..."

"...Ah, er, sorry. I've been sweating a lot..."

"It's fine. Your scent's the same as it always was... I've missed you, you know?" she said, her eyes moist.

Whoa! If you come out with lines like that, Prez, you'll make my heart skip a beat!

"I haven't been able to sleep by your side since we arrived in the underworld. There have been no chances to hold you, either. I can't imagine life without you anymore... I'm a pitiful master, aren't I?"

Ahhhhh, Prez! Is she becoming increasingly dependent on me? As her servant, I was honored! I couldn't imagine life without her, either! That was why even though my training on that lonely mountaintop was so painful and arduous, I was determined to keep going! Before I managed to say as much to her, however...

"But I need to be patient. We both need to get stronger. Issei, good luck with Tannin! Show his fiery breath what you're made of!"

"—! Er, r-right! I'll do my best not to get burned to a crisp!" I replied with tears in my eyes.

Yep, the prez was uncompromising when it came to training! I understood! If that was what she wanted, then I would go all out or die trying!

There was something I wanted to ask, however. "U-uh, Prez? How's Koneko doing?"

Immediately, her expression clouded over. "Come with me."

Rias led me to Koneko's room. She had already spoken to her Rook and told me to see her by myself. Apparently, Akeno was with Koneko, too.

Her suite was spacious. When I entered the bedroom, I saw Akeno standing by the bed, where Koneko lay facedown.

My eyes fell upon what had sprouted from Koneko's head, and I nearly

gasped.

Cat ears!

I already knew she was a *nekomata*, but it was still a shock! She had real-life cat ears! They were so endearingly lovely! How adorable!

Perhaps Koneko normally hid them, and they'd only appeared now because she'd run herself ragged.

This was no time to be asking about frivolous things like that, however. I was here to check on her condition.

"Issei, this isn't—," Akeno began to explain when she saw my reaction.

"It's all right; I've heard the story," I interrupted.

Akeno fell silent as I approached one side of the bed.

Koneko didn't look to have any wounds. Well, Asia would've healed them, so that should have been obvious. Was this purely a case of exhaustion, then?

"Hey. How are you feeling?" I asked with a smile.

"...What are you doing here?" Koneko mumbled, half-opening her eyes.

Her voice was sullen. I had never heard her sound so defeated. Was she angry at me for coming to see her?

"...What if I said I was worried about you?"

"..." Still sulking, she didn't respond.

"Koneko," I continued. "I've heard what happened. But you know, pushing yourself past your limits won't do you any good. If you don't look after your body... Well, maybe I'm not the one to be saying this after everything I've been going through lately, but still..."

"...I want to...", she murmured under her breath.

I hadn't been able to make out the last part of that sentence. "Huh? What was that?"

Then, pulling her head up and looking straight at me, holding back tears, she declared, "I want to be strong, in mind and body. Like Yuuto, and Xenovia, and

Akeno...and like you, Issei... I don't have any special abilities like Asia's healing powers... At this rate, I won't be of any use to anyone... I'm supposed to be a Rook...but I'm the weakest of us all... I hate being so useless..."

"Koneko..."

So that was what had been bothering her... It was certainly true that Kiba was much stronger now than he had been just a short time ago, that Akeno was incredibly powerful as our Familia's Queen, and that Gasper's abilities allowed him to pause time. And while Asia might not have been an exceptionally skilled fighter, her restoration ability was beyond compare. As for me... I was weak under normal circumstances, but I had been saddled with a legendary dragon.

Koneko continued, tears streaking down her face: "...But I don't want to use it...this *nekomata* power inside me... If I let it out...I'll end up like my sister... I don't want that to happen..."

This was the first time I had ever seen her sob like this. She had never shown much emotion in the past, making this a huge shock.

Koneko's older sibling had gone into a frenzy and killed her master. Then she had abandoned her own sister. According to Venelana, Koneko had been through a lot.

She must have been terrified, knowing the same dangerous strength that had slain her sister's master lived within her, too... Nonetheless, she wanted to grow stronger for the battles ahead of us. Our underworld training camp had forced these two conflicting ideals to clash.

Koneko had pushed herself beyond her physical limits because she was intent on becoming stronger without drawing on her latent abilities.

She had a warmhearted soul and cared deeply for her friends. It must have been harrowing for her to think she couldn't be of use to us despite wanting to repay Rias for saving her.

I could relate. I often felt frustrated with my weakness and inability to properly serve the prez...

Akeno shook her head before addressing me: "Issei, let us handle this."

“But—”

“You’re a kind person, Issei, but you need to learn when to keep your distance. Besides, you need to get stronger, too. I’m... I’m no different from Koneko. The two of us will find a way through this together. If you can’t accept who you are, you won’t be able to move forward. We both understand that on a mental level... But we haven’t been able to bring ourselves to fully embrace it yet. Just give us a little time. Please...”

Akeno detested the fallen angel blood that flowed through her veins. However, refusing its ability to command holy light would keep her at a permanent disadvantage.

She and Koneko were very much alike in that way. The two girls were struggling with great powers lying dormant inside them.

“Got it. Akeno, Koneko... I-I’ll focus on doing the things that only I can do.” I bowed my head to them both and left the room.

We all had our challenges. We all had our own individual training regimens. We all had our own hurdles that needed to be overcome.

All right! We can do this! Akeno! Koneko! Everyone! Prez! I’ll dedicate myself to my training!

I slept like a baby for the rest of the day before returning to the mountain the following morning.

Life.3

Cat and Dragon!

“Aughhhhh!”

“Explosion!”

The boosted power from my Sacred Gear flowed into my body, instantly enhancing my physical abilities!

“Let’s see you dodge this!” that old geezer Tannin shouted, opening his mouth wide! *Booooooooooom!*

I nimbly dodged the rapid succession of fireballs that came flying my way and aimed my hand upward!

Then I imagined myself launching a huge magic projectile! And I fired it! My Dragon Shot!

Boom!

A mass of demonic energy around half the size of my mentor surged straight toward him! This one should have been even more powerful than the one I had used to demolish a mountain in the human world a while back! As a result, launching it all but wholly depleted my strength. One of my many weaknesses was that I only had a paltry amount of power to begin with, and I could only increase it so much.

“Hmph! So you’re finally starting to put up a decent fight!” The old geezer didn’t show any sign of moving. Was he planning to catch the blast head-on?!

Boooooooooooooom!

Tannin crossed his arms, ready to receive the full brunt of the attack, before suddenly spewing a mighty gout of his fiery dragon breath back at me!

Wha—?!

Booooooooooom!

The mass of energy I had hurled at him was sent veering off into the sky!

“Reset.”

At that moment, my boosted strength returned to normal, and a wave of fatigue swept over me.

Tannin glanced at his smoking arms. Had my strike burned him?

“That was a fine blow. Your dragon powers have certainly increased compared with when we first met, as have your physical abilities. You’ve reached the point where we could play hide-and-seek all day long.” Coming from the old geezer, that was a rare compliment.

I fought to catch my ragged breath as I gulped down a mouthful of water from the canteen I kept strapped to my waist. It was a special liquid, one that not only quenched my thirst but also charged my Sacred Gear with water to offset and weaken the effects of Tannin’s fire breath. I had put a good bit of consideration into other strategies to withstand his attacks as well.

My appearance was a mess. All that remained of my tracksuit were a few scraps that protected the most vulnerable parts of my body. My chest was all but completely exposed. Yep. I had put on a bit of muscle. There was practically zero unnecessary fat remaining on me.

For sustenance, I had been hunting animals and foraging all over the mountain for edible plants. You could say I had developed quite a wild side. One thing was for sure: I never expected to spend my summer break living like some hermit.

Thanks to my newfound survival skills, I had picked up how to use my powers to light fires, and combining that with my Sacred Gear, I had even learned to replicate some of Tannin’s special fire moves! I literally had massive firepower! First chance I got, I was going to show everyone!

A good amount of time had passed since I had sworn that oath to myself in Koneko’s room. Our battle with the Sitri Familia was scheduled to take place on August 20. It was now the fifteenth—we only had five more days. It was about time to wrap things up.

It wouldn't be long until I was supposed to rejoin the others before the match to get some rest. After all, we would probably all need a little time to recover from our training before the big day.

On top of that, I had learned that the Demon King would be hosting a social event beforehand, too, to which our Familia and those of the other up-and-coming demon youths had been invited. In other words, my training was over. We were out of time.

"You've done well thus far... But it's a pity we can't keep going. If we had just a few more days, we might have been able to push you over the line. Tomorrow will be our final day...but I doubt it will be enough." Tannin let out a resigned sigh.

I knew what he meant. In terms of physical strength and my demonic powers, I had undoubtedly improved by leaps and bounds... Still, I hadn't managed to unlock my Balance Breaker.

The goal line was still ahead of me.



"In that case, I should be off. I'm also expected at the Demon King's banquet. We shall meet again, Issei Hyoudou, Ddraig," Tannin said to me in front of the main Gremory residence.

He had given me a lift on his back. It was actually surprisingly comfortable, an overwhelming experience! Short though the journey was, it was unforgettable!

"Yep. Thanks again, Tannin! I'll see you soon!" I replied.

"Sorry for troubling you, Tannin. Until next time," appended Ddraig.

"Don't worry about it. It was fun. I got to work with the famous Red Dragon Emperor. This longevity of ours might not be such a bad thing after all. Oh, do you want to make your appearance at the party on my back?"

"Really? Are you sure?" I questioned.

"Yeah, it's no problem. I'll bring my Familia members here on the day of. I'll get in touch with the Gremory household later with the details."

Who knew that old geezer could be so cool?

“All right then, I’ll return tomorrow. Farewell!” With that, Tannin flapped his wings and took off.

I waved back to him as he disappeared into the sky.

“He’s easygoing for a Dragon King,” Ddraig mused.

“I think he’s a good guy. Sure, he gave me a heck of a fright when I first saw him...but dragons are so awesome!”

“You and I are dragons, too, you realize?”

“Sure... But there’s no comparison to the majesty of a true, flesh-and-blood one. I’m just a spindly former human possessed by a Sacred Gear.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Right? Tannin’s a *real* dragon!”

“Hey, Issei.”

I turned around at the sound of a familiar voice—and found Kiba approaching. He was wearing his tracksuit, but it, too, was torn to ribbons. It looked like I wasn’t the only one who’d suffered a rough few weeks.

His pretty-boy face looked leaner and firmer than it had before.

“...You’ve been working out,” Kiba remarked, staring at my naked chest.

I raced to cover myself. “C-cut it out! What’s with those eyes...?! Don’t leer at me like that!”

For some reason, I felt like I was in danger! Seriously, this guy gave me the creeps sometimes!

“H-how cruel. I only wanted to compliment your well-toned muscles.”

“You...haven’t changed, have you?”

“Yeah. I guess my body just isn’t made for putting on muscle. I’m jealous.”

“Oh, Issei, Kiba?”

This time, it was a woman’s voice that sounded—Xenovia’s.

Uhhhhh, why the hell is she covered in bandages?!

“Wh-what happened to you...?” I asked nervously.

The girl looked herself over before answering. “Right, well, whenever I injured myself, I bandaged it up and just kept going. Before long, I looked like this.”

“You look like a mummy!” I exclaimed.

“How rude. I don’t plan on being preserved like this forever, you know.”

“That isn’t what I meant!”

Evidently, the weeks of practice had done nothing to alter her strange way of thinking. That said, her aura was quieter and leaner than it had been before. Kiba’s looked like it had grown stronger, too...

Huh? Has my ability to read people’s demon powers improved? Is this another benefit of my training with Tannin? Perhaps my senses had grown more finely tuned after I’d become one with the lands of the underworld.

“Issei! Kiba! Xenovia!” someone called from the entrance to the mansion.

It was Asia, wearing her nun outfit. Ah, it was sooo good to see her again!

“Asia! I’ve missed you!”

“I-Issei! P-put some clothes on!” she stammered at the sight of my half-naked body.

She saw me naked all the time, so she must have been more flustered by the fact that we were out in the open than because she could see my body.

“Oh, you’re all back?”

The next face to join us—was the prez! How I had longed for her! My Prez! My Rias! She was just as beautiful as ever!

“Prezzzzz! I’ve missed you!”

“Issei... You’ve been working out. Your chest is wider,” she remarked, embracing me tightly.

Oh, how I’d yearned to hold her soft body in my arms... Probably because I had repressed my perverted inclinations during my mountain seclusion, catching the scent of the woman I loved after such a long time filled my body with vigor... Yep, there was nothing better than a girl’s touch.

“Now then, everyone. Come inside. After you’ve all had a chance to shower and change into fresh clothes, we will need to discuss your individual progress,” said Rias.

And so I had returned to civilized life after what felt like ages.

Unfortunately, as ashamed as I was, I would have to report that I had failed to unlock my Balance Breaker.



It had been more than two weeks since every member of Rias Gremory’s Familia had gathered together like this.

After receiving my personalized training regimen from Azazel, I had been spirited away to my mountain proving ground by Tannin. From the look of things, the rest of the Familia had gone their separate ways at the same time. As such, this was our first full reunion since the start of the training camp.

Strictly speaking, we had never been split up for so long. At least, not since I’d joined the Familia. I couldn’t comment on anything before then.

Kiba, Xenovia, and I, who had each been sent to remote locations for training, met in my room after washing up and changing into fresh attire. Everyone else joined soon after. Why my room, you ask? Even I didn’t know for sure. Apparently, it was the easiest place to access, and we weren’t able to use the prez’s quarters for some reason. Perhaps she had something in there we weren’t allowed to see?

In any event, now that we were all together, we began to discuss the fruits of our efforts. Kiba gave a detailed account of his time with his sword master, Xenovia recounted the trials of her regimen, and I outlined my tale of survival with the dragon Tannin.

By comparison, I’d clearly had it the worst. Kiba and Xenovia had left the estate, but from what they described, it sounded as though they’d stayed at a cottage and a villa, respectively, both owned by the House of Gremory. My story of scrounging up plants and hunting animals while avoiding the fury of a fire-breathing lizard seemed unimaginable to them.

Huh? Huuuuuuh? You’re kidding, right? Am I the only one who had to rough it?

I'd had to sleep out in the open—no blankets, no pillow—amid the gargantuan foliage of the underworld...

"Er, Teach? Did no one else have to live out in the elements...?" I asked Azazel.

"Believe me, I'm just as surprised as you are. I thought you would run home crying before even reaching the halfway point. I wasn't expecting you to start surviving off the land."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?! Y-you...?! I—I had to hunt these rabbitlike things, and those boar creatures, and kill and cook them myself! Boiling water to make sure it was clean became a regular chore for me..."

"That's what I mean. You're a tough one. Tougher than most demons, in a certain sense."

"You monster! A dragon chased me around that mountain for weeks on end! Do you know how many times I was this close to dying up there?! Do you?!"

I wept tears of frustration! I mean... Ugh! It was just too unfair!

"All I wanted was to see the prez! I covered myself in fallen leaves to sleep at night, imagining her precious warmth! It was so tough! Arghhhhh! But that old dragon wouldn't give me a break! He'd come after me while I was resting and set the whole forest on fire! I had to run for my life! If I didn't, he would have killed me! Gyahhhhhh!"

"You poor thing, Issei... I'm so glad you held out. My, look how hardy you've become... That mountain doesn't have a name, but I think I'll have everyone call it Mount Issei from now on." The prez pulled my head to her chest, embracing me.

The soft touch of her breasts wiped away the pain of the past few weeks!

I was so surprised by her actions that I took her in my arms, too, and hugged her back! Azazel was just too cruel! He had given me away to a dragon to be his plaything! I could still remember the sight of the prez bidding me good-bye from below as Tannin carried me off! Now that I thought about it, what was that if not a kidnapping?!

“No, your physical state looks to have improved considerably. As you are now, it shouldn’t be long before you can activate your Balance Breaker Scale Mail... But I’m guessing you haven’t reached it yet?” Azazel didn’t seem particularly disappointed by that. “Well, I always knew this outcome was within the realm of possibility. Yeah, you don’t need to act so shocked there, Issei. No one can reach their Balance Breaker without something drastic pushing them over the edge. I was hoping that pitting you in a life-and-death struggle against a Dragon King–class opponent might be able to do it, but I guess we didn’t have enough time. If only there was another month...”

Impossible! I couldn’t live like that for another four weeks! I would die of loneliness for the prez! Without her warmth now and then, I would lose the will to live!

I buried my face in her chest! I couldn’t do it! No, no, no! I didn’t ever want to go to that mountain again!

Rias patted me on the head.

Whooooooooaaaaa! Preeeeeee!

“Well, I guess it’s fine. That’s it for today’s meeting. You’ve got your party tomorrow. You’re all dismissed for now,” Azazel stated, bringing our debriefing session to an end.

Thus, the curtain fell on my time as a wilderness survivalist.

That night, I found myself sharing my bed with Asia and Xenovia. Somehow, they both wound up sleeping with me.

The two had insisted they were unable to relax in their spacious suites alone, and so they had come to me.

Asia was already sound asleep. Probably because the bed was so wide, Xenovia was lying a little distance away from me. She stared blankly up at the ceiling. I wondered if she was having difficulty passing out.

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time she had ever slept in the same bed as me. Maybe that was why she couldn’t doze off?

“...What’s wrong? Can’t you fall asleep?” I asked.

“I’m not used to sharing a bed with a man yet, even if there’s nothing sexual about it... I guess I’m nervous...”

She could confess all that but was still on edge about lying next to me?

Well, it wasn’t like I didn’t understand what she meant.

“R-right. I mean, wh-when the prez and Asia first started sleeping by my side, I was so excited, I couldn’t drift off, either. Sharing a bed with someone of the opposite sex does that to you, I guess.”

“I—I see. So this is natural, then? Still, Asia is incredible. It looks like she’s resting so peacefully.”

“Asia is...well, she always sleeps beside the prez and me back home. I think she was pretty embarrassed at first, but she’s used to it now. Knowing she’s there helps me relax, too.”

“...Issei, please don’t leave me behind... Ngh...,” the person in question murmured in her sleep.

“Heh. I can see why you and the president think she’s so cute.” Xenovia chuckled.

Right? Asia’s unconscious face was the most adorable sight I had ever seen.

Before I knew it, I, too, drifted off as the night wore on...



The following evening, I found myself waiting in the drawing room, dressed in my Kuou Academy uniform. It was the day of the banquet. With twelve hours of rest, I was feeling nearly back to full strength after my trials on that awful mountain.

It’d been a while since I’d last worn my uniform. Lately, it felt like tracksuits had become my everyday attire. It really was comfortable to be back in something else.

I was also sporting an armband with the insignia of the House of Gremory on it. It was apparently necessary for attending the banquet.

The girls had all been ushered off by the maids. It would probably be a little while yet before they were ready.

Both Kiba and Gasper had disappeared, too, saying they had something to take care of...

“Hyoudou?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the familiar voice—and found Saji. Hold on, what was he doing here?!

“I wasn’t expecting to see you yet,” I said.

“Ah, the chairwoman is going to the banquet with Rias, so she wanted to talk with her, and I got dragged along for the ride. But I guess they needed to discuss in private, so I was left to wander this mansion alone.”

The Gremory residence truly was gigantic and easy to get lost in.

Saji took a seat beside me, his expression turning serious. “The match is coming up soon.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been training.”

“Me too. A dragon chased me around a mountain for weeks.”

“I—I see. You always do things the hard way, huh? Well, I’ve had a tough few weeks, too, I guess.”

Oh? So he went all in on getting stronger as well?

It was only natural. Our performances could mean the difference between victory and defeat for our masters. I was ready.

Saji scratched his cheek before continuing. “Hyoudou. Do you remember what happened at the Demon Youth Social last month?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“The chairwoman and I were serious... M-my dream...is to become a teacher!” he blurted out, his face turning red.

“A teacher? What are you going to teach?”

Saji’s face was still flushed with embarrassment as he responded, “The chairwoman wants to start a school here in the underworld specializing in

Rating Games. But unlike similar places, its doors will be open to everyone, accepting demons from all levels of the nobility and commoners, too. She says that demon society is slowly moving on from its traditions and prejudices, but there are still many people here who refuse to accept these kinds of changes. That's why the current Rating Game schools only accept those of high pedigree. Still, Rating Games are equal ground for everyone, right? The Demon Kings say so, anyway. I guess they *technically* are, but it's tough for a commoner to compete with the kind of experience and education a high-class demon has access to. Considering that success in Rating Games is often how demons from low-ranking backgrounds get promoted... Well, you see the contradiction, yeah? People like us should get a fair shake and rise up!"

Though taken aback by Saji's fervor, I appreciated just how serious he was about this. It sounded like he was working to shape the future in his own way.

"The chairwoman wants to do something about that. She wants to show the world that even low-class demons can play the Rating Game. That's why she wants to build a school down here in the underworld! She's been studying so hard to give people who have never had the opportunity to enter the limelight a chance at a better life! Even if the odds are only one percent, anyone can become a high-class demon so long as there's a chance! Hyoudou! That's what you and I are aiming for, right? Because we believe in that slim possibility!"

"Yeah."

He was spot-on there. I had set my sights on becoming a high-class demon. Even if the world were entirely against me, I would turn it on its head!

Saji raised his fist into the air. "Th-that's why I'm going to be a teacher here! I'll study everything I can, fight in the Rating Game, and get tons of experience! That's how I'll become a teacher for Pawns! The chairwoman wants my help. Even someone like me can become a helpful instructor... I—I used to get into all sorts of stupid trouble. I made life difficult for my parents, and I hate how I behaved. The chairwoman gave me a goal to work toward! I'll stay by her side all my life! Because her dream is *my* dream!"

Saji paused there for a moment, clearly bashful over his proclamation. "Heh-heh-heh. I still haven't told my mom I'm a demon. When I mentioned to her

that I wanted to be a teacher, she cried, ‘You?!’ Maybe she didn’t think I was suited to that kind of thing. But you know, it wasn’t so bad. She looked relieved, too.”

The two of us were both Pawns, but we had very different paths.

I hoped to become independent of my master, whereas Saji wished to serve his for the rest of his life. We might have both become demons around the same time, but our aspirations were dissimilar.

It was such a simple realization, and yet it struck me as almost miraculous.

“That’s an awesome goal, Saji. Be the best teacher ever.”

“Yeah. I’m going to have to beat you in our next match to get there, though.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I’m sorry to break it to you, but we’re the ones who are going to win!”

“No, we are. Now that the higher-ups have made fools of us, we have to show them what we’re made of!”

We both broke out into laughter, but our gazes were unyielding. Neither of us was about to back down.

Still, a teacher, eh? I suddenly thought about Azazel. I was pretty sure Saji wouldn’t end up like him.

“By the way, Saji...”

“What?”

I raised a finger into the air.

“I’ve heard that a woman’s nipples are like doorbells. They cause her to make a sound when you press them.”

“...Wh-what?!”

It looked like I had caught his interest. His mind was just as dirty as mine was!

“According to Azazel, breasts are objects of infinite possibilities. I wouldn’t want to move on to the next world without rubbing them, squeezing them, digging my fingers into them...”

“...Hey, Hyoudou. When am I going to get to squeeze *my* master’s breasts?” Saji questioned seriously.

“Wh-who knows? It’s not like I’m always touching mine. Once our luck starts piling up, then we’ll be able to. Probably.”

Saji drew close, fire burning in his eyes. “Quit it with all that *luck* talk! None of it has fallen *my* way!”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. Normally, the best I get is to sleep beside her, or to take a bath with her...” I paused there, realizing I had said too much.

Saji looked to be in a state of deep shock. He hobbled unsteadily away from me, falling to his seat with a *thud*. The poor guy looked terrible. His eyes were frozen wide in shock, his whole body trembling.

“...Sleep...? Bathe...? What...? I-I’ve...never even...”

“S-Saji...? Hey, come on...,” I called out to no response. He simply continued to murmur unintelligibly under his breath.

“Issei, sorry for keeping you waiting. Oh, Saji, you’re here, too?”

I turned around and found the prez garbed in a gorgeous dress! All the other girls were, too!

Whooooooooaaaaa!

Everyone was wearing beautiful makeup and eye-catching attire! Let’s not forget their hairstyles! They all looked like fairy-tale princesses! Akeno was wearing a Western-style dress today! Dammit, she was so incredibly cute! Beyond lovely!

Asia looked embarrassed, but no less lovely for it. It didn’t seem like Xenovia was used to wearing formal outfits, but she could easily have passed for a well-bred young lady!

Koneko’s outfit was obviously a step down in size, but that adorableness of hers was so intense that it could tempt a pervert into kidnapping her!

The problem was Gasper.

“Why are *you* wearing a dress?!” I exclaimed.

Yep, he was in one as well! It suited him so much that I couldn't find the words! He'd said there was something he needed to do. Was it *this*?!

"I—I mean, I wanted to wear it..."

Who could've guessed his cross-dressing hobby had reached this point?

"Saji. Saji, what is it?" Chairwoman Sona, similarly dressed up, glanced suspiciously at her Pawn.

He was still sulking.

When everyone had finished changing into their formal clothes, the sound of a tremendous *thud* echoed from the garden.

After a moment, a butler approached, stating, "Master Tannin and his Familia have arrived."

As promised, the old geezer had come to pick us up!

An impressive sight awaited us in the garden. Including Tannin, almost a dozen dragons sat perched, waiting for us!



They were huge! It was incredible! I hadn't suspected that all the members of his Familia were dragons!

"Here I am, Issei Hyoudou. As promised," Tannin declared.

"Yep! Thanks, Tannin!"

"So long as you're riding on our backs, I'll use a special barrier to keep your hair and clothes in order. I've learned that women are fastidious about that," the old geezer said.

How considerate! He was undoubtedly a demon of the highest order!

"Thank you, Tannin, for offering to take us to the venue. Several members of Sona Sitri's Familia are here, too. Do you mind if they travel with us?" the prez asked.

"Oh, Lady Rias. You look splendid. You can leave your friends to me," replied Tannin.

We all climbed onto the dragons' backs and soared the skies of the underworld! I got to sit on Tannin's head, the best seat in the house! I had a full view of everything for miles around as we made our journey!

Whoa!

As I had suspected, the sights from above were fantastic! The underworld had been a nonstop series of fantastical experiences like this, and I loved all of them. Except for having a dragon hunt me across a mountaintop, that is!

"This vista from atop a dragon goes beyond words," Ddraig mused. He used to be one, too, after all.

"Ha-ha-ha! It *is* an indescribable feeling, isn't it, Ddraig?" Tannin replied. "Sadly, there are likely no more than three mighty dragons still at large, myself included. Actually, I'm a reincarnated demon now, so that only leaves Ophis and Tiamat. The rest have either been defeated and locked away or gone into seclusion. Yulong and Midgardsormr haven't shown their faces in eons. You, Albion, Fafnir, and Vritra have all been sealed in Sacred Gears. In every age, mighty dragons are brought low because people fear creatures like us." The old geezer's voice seemed forlorn.

“Now that you mention it, how *did* you get reincarnated as a demon, Tannin?” I inquired.

The dragon’s eyes turned serious. “Part of it is because there are no big battles to be fought anymore. I hoped that by doing this, I would be able to fight in Rating Games. However, I’ve got another reason...”

“Another one?”

“...Have you ever heard of a dragon apple?”

“No. I’m guessing it’s a kind of fruit that dragons eat?”

“There is a race of dragons who can only survive by consuming dragon apples. They grew in the human realm, but they’ve gone extinct due to drastic environmental changes. Now they can only be found here in the underworld. But you see, dragons have long been despised here by demons and fallen angels alike. There’s no way either faction would give away that fruit for free. That’s why I chose to become a demon: to establish a territory where I could grow dragon apples. Attaining the rank of a high-class demon means the Demon King grants you land. That was my goal.”

“So you’re saying that race of dragons lives in your territory?”

“Yeah. It’s the only reason they haven’t gone extinct. And I’ve been conducting research to find other ways to cultivate dragon apples. It’s an unusual plant, so it takes time to study. But if those dragons are to have a future, we need to do all we can.”

Incredible. He was willing to go that far to save another species of dragon? As far as I was concerned, he fully deserved his title of Dragon King.

“You’re a good dragon,” I said.

Tannin laughed. “A good dragon? Gwa-ha-ha-ha! That’s the first time anyone has ever called me something like that! And from the Red Dragon Emperor, no less! I’m honored! But you know, kid, all living things want to preserve their kind. There’s nothing unique about that. Humans, demons, dragons—we’re all the same. I’m only trying to save my kin. That’s what someone who has power can do for those who don’t.”

“...Wow. I’ve just blindly been chasing after my dream of becoming a high-class demon. Th-that and getting my own harem. I guess that kind of attitude is no good...”

“You’re young, so no one will hold it against you. Many young men chase after ladies and money. Don’t overdo it, but there’s nothing wrong with that being your motivation. However, you’ll be putting your talents to waste if a harem is your endgame, Issei Hyoudou. Women naturally flock to strong men. The problem is acquiring both women and wealth... Hmm, perhaps this topic is too much for you, though. You’re still young.”

I couldn’t deny that Tannin was getting into some complex stuff.

That said, I had met a great many demons since coming to the underworld, which had gotten me thinking.

They all lived their lives aiming toward a goal.

Whether that was winning a tournament, rising to the rank of Demon King, saving dragons, or becoming a teacher.

Each of them was a demon, but none sought the same thing. And me? A harem king?

I still hoped to be one someday, but it was probably time for me to move away from those delusional ideas and on to something more realistic.

After all, there were a lot of prerequisites to becoming the master of a menagerie of women.

As I continued to chat with Tannin, my slow brain wrestled with itself over a few complex notions. Eventually, a bright light grew visible on the horizon.

It looked like we would be arriving soon.



The luxurious high-rise hotel that served as the site for the banquet was located in a large clearing within a massive forest on the edge of the Gremory territory.

The scale was off the charts! I could make out the entirety of the grounds from atop Tannin, but it was so large that my hometown could have easily fit

inside within its perimeter!

The dragons who were ferrying us here set themselves down on what looked like a sports concourse. Several lights focused in on Tannin, making him look like a monster from an old B movie.

“My Familia and I will be making our way to the area set aside for oversized demons,” he informed me.

“Thank you, Tannin.”

“Thanks again, old man!”

As the prez and I thanked him, Tannin took off once more, leading his dragon Familia to another area within the hotel grounds.

The next thing we knew, a group of staff from the hotel appeared on the sports ground to pick us up, leading us to—a limousine! This was just one colossal shock after another!

The prez and Asia sat beside me, while the members of the Sitri Familia took the back seat.

Straightening my collar for me, the prez began to explain, “This hotel has a lot of facilities, and the military is waiting nearby. They’re a lot stricter here than they are in the cities, do you understand?”

She pulled a comb out of her expensive-looking handbag and began to tidy my hair, which must have gotten disheveled riding on Tannin’s head. The wind hadn’t felt particularly strong up there, but I probably had the old geezer’s barrier to thank for that.

“Prez, what about Azazel?” I questioned.

“He will be joining us after meeting up with my brother and the others en route. It sounds like they’ve established a bit of a friendship...”

It was good to hear that the big shots from each of the three factions were getting along with one another.

I had broken out into a grin, but the prez’s expression remained stern. “Perhaps you didn’t hear it because you were up front on Tannin’s head, but Sona issued a declaration of war against us. ‘I’ll defeat you for the sake of my

dream,' she said."

All that had happened during the flight over?! I had been too focused on the view to notice!

"Her goal, to found a school—a Rating Game school... The reason she went to the human world was to study the local teaching system. She holds human academies in high regard, as they allow anyone to enroll in them, regardless of birth or status."

Saji had said the same thing—that the chairwoman attended Kuou Academy in pursuit of her dream.

"You know, Prez, Saji mentioned something similar to me. He wants to become a teacher. He's serious. His eyes were practically glowing when he told me..."

"Even so, *we're* going to win. We have our own ambitions, after all." The prez's determination was unyielding. She wouldn't spare her opponent, not even if it were a friend.

Looks like I'm going head-to-head with Saji, then. Look out, buddy. I'm coming for you!

Our limousine arrived at the hotel. Upon stepping out, we were greeted by a group of staff. Akeno checked in for us at the front desk, and we made our way to the elevator.

"The party is on the top floor. Issei, if anyone from a distinguished family approaches, make sure to greet them properly, all right?"

"O-okay. But, Prez... The Demon King organized all this, right? For the demon youths?"

"That's just a pretext. We're not the stars tonight. In truth, this is an annual custom. Think of it more like a regular family gathering. My father and the other leaders probably thought to kill two birds with one stone by inviting us, but they're only here to enjoy themselves. They've probably already made plans for four or five afterparties. The fact that they're coming by themselves all but confirms it. I wouldn't be surprised to learn they've started drinking..." Rias trailed off there, clearly displeased.

Akeno and Kiba flashed us forced smiles.

The party hadn't even started, and the prez was fed up with it. More specifically, she was pissed about the actions of her father and the other high-ranking demons. The Demon Kings officially hosted the celebration, yet it sounded more like a casual get-together than a typical high-society event. This was an excuse for the bigwigs to unwind.

The elevator came to a stop, and we stepped out into a resplendent banquet hall! The room was filled to the brim with demons conversing and tables piled up with delicious food! And the ceiling—just as I expected, it was dominated by a giant chandelier! Everywhere I went seemed to be filled with chandeliers lately!

“Oooh.” Hushed murmurs coursed through the hall as the guests realized who had just entered.

“Princess Rias. You're even more beautiful than I remember...”

“Lord Sirzechs must be so proud.”

Everyone was staring at the prez. She had said that they probably wouldn't make a big deal over us, but these people certainly looked excited! I was in a good mood, too, positively filled with pride.

I mean, I was the guy who had held this woman's breasts!

A wide grin spread across my face. What was this feeling of victory that had come over me? Maybe it was because I was the only one who knew the deepest secrets of the girl I loved?

“Ugh, there are so many people...,” Gasper murmured, clinging tightly to my back.

This again...? Isn't he wearing that outfit precisely because he wants to show it off? What's the point of cross-dressing if he's afraid for anyone to see? I still couldn't understand his thinking.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought his fear of strangers had lessened a little. At the very least, he wasn't trying to run away, despite the curious gazes of so many focused on us. Maybe his training had helped with

that?

“Issei, we need to greet everyone,” the prez said.

“Huh?”

My confusion must have been written large on my face, but it looked like there were a great many high-class demons here who were eager to meet the legendary Red Dragon Emperor.

Rias led me through the hall, moving from one well-to-do demon to another. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the gentlemanly manners her mother had drilled into me were proving effective.

Now that I was a part of the prez’s Familia, these societal graces were essential skills.

Thank you, Venelana! Because of you, I won’t make a fool of myself!

“Ah, I’m exhausted...”

Now that the formalities were out of the way, I finally had a minute to myself.

Asia, Gasper, and I were sitting at the table assigned to us in a corner of the room. The prez and Akeno were a short distance away, conversing with other female demons.

Kiba—damn him—was surrounded by ladies! Argh! That cursed pretty boy!

Still, this was my first time attending an event like this, so like Asia and the others, I was completely drained.

Now and then, a male demon would approach our table to greet Asia. Yep, even here in the underworld, people understood her level of cuteness. She was so adorable.

“Issei, Asia, Gasper, I’ve brought food. Eat up.” Xenovia, having left her seat a moment ago, returned all but juggling more extravagant dishes than I could count.

“Sorry for making you run errands for us, Xenovia,” I said in thanks.

“It’s nothing. This is easy. You could do with a drink, too, Asia.”

“Thank you, Xenovia... I’ve never been to anything like this before... I’m so

nervous that my throat got dry...,” Asia whispered as she began to sip from a glass of juice Xenovia handed her.

I started working on the various dishes. Xenovia had even handed me a set of chopsticks, which was a surprise. With many reincarnated demons present, the organizers must have arranged to have all forms of eating utensils on hand.

No sooner had I dug in than a young girl wearing a dress appeared before me. She was all but glaring my way.

Huh? Who is she? I felt as if I had seen her somewhere before.

“Y-you’re...”

“I-it’s been a while, Red Dragon Emperor.”

“You’re that roast chicken’s sister!”

Yep, she was Riser Phenex’s younger sibling.

Seeing her brought back memories. How many months had it been?

“That’s Ravel Phenex! Geez, this is what I hate about low-class demons!” She was incensed. Was she still ticked over the way the engagement had been called off?

“Sorry. So how’s your brother?” I inquired.

Ravel let out a sigh. “...Thanks to you, he hasn’t stopped brooding. Getting beaten up and losing Rias were both huge shocks to him. I suppose he relied too much on our family’s unique abilities to win and grew cocky for it. You might’ve taught him a valuable lesson.”

Ouch, that sounded tough. Even Riser’s little sister was showing the guy no mercy.

“Ha-ha-ha... You’re merciless; you know that? Aren’t you part of his Familia?”

“About that... I’ve been traded, so I’m in my mother’s Familia now. She gave Riser one of her unused pieces in exchange. She doesn’t play the Rating Game, and she said she would trade me again once I find someone whose Familia I want to join. In other words, I’m essentially a free Bishop.”

“Traded?” I wasn’t familiar with that concept.

“Huh? Don’t you know? It’s one of the rules of the Rating Game. Kings can swap pieces, so long as they’re both of the same type.”

I’d never heard anyone mention that before.

“B-by the way, Red Dragon Emperor—”

“Don’t call me that. My name is Issei Hyoudou. We’re about the same age, right? You can address me normally. Everyone just calls me Issei.”

Despite what I said, Ravel was a demon, which meant she could probably freely change her appearance. The girl looked like a teenager, but she might have been older.

No, judging from her behavior, she can’t be an adult...

“C-can I really call you by your name?!”

Huh...? What’s with that reaction? She sounded almost...happy. Impossible. Ravel always acted superior to me.

“A-ahem. M-Master Issei, then.”

“‘Master’? Seriously, I’m not hung up on things like that,” I insisted.

“No, it’s important!”

This girl was even more incomprehensible than Xenovia. I couldn’t keep up with her.

That’s when another familiar face chose to make their entrance. “Ravel. A friend of Master Riser would like to see you.”

It was a woman who was part of Riser’s Familia. She was a bit older. Isabella, I think her name was. She had put up a heck of a fight until I had used my Dress Break technique on her. The sight of her naked body was still fresh in my mind.

“Very well. Master Issei, why don’t we have a cup of tea together next time? A-a-and maybe I could b-bake a cake for you?” With that, she lifted the hem of her dress, curtsied, and hurried away.

Yep, I didn’t understand her one little bit.

“Hi there, Issei Hyoudou,” Isabella called out to me.

“You’re Isabella, right? From Riser’s Familia?”

“Indeed. You dealt me a good blow last time. Yes, I remember it well. I hear you’ve grown stronger since then, too. Keep going. The mightier you become, the more I’ll be able to boast about my own loss to you.”

“Um, er... Are you Ravel’s...escort?”

“Well, something like that. Like Master Riser, there are things Ravel finds difficult to deal with... Ever since your fight at the engagement party, you are all she has been able to talk about. Your fight with Master Riser left quite the impression on her.”

“Isn’t that just her complaining? I interfered in her sibling’s plans and said some pretty thoughtless things to her, too.”

“...No, quite the opposite. But you needn’t worry. You’ll understand sooner or later.”

“Uh... Sure. Anyway, tell her that I’m fine for tea.”

“Really? I appreciate that. I’m sure she’ll be pleased to hear it. In that case, I’ll leave you be. Enjoy yourself.” With that, Isabella took her leave with a casual wave.

Both of those women were complete enigmas.

Still, there was no point in quarreling with Ravel. And all I had agreed to was a cup of tea, right?

“...Issei, you have a lot of demon friends, don’t you...?” Gasper remarked with admiration.

Is that what it looks like?

I wasn’t so sure. There was no denying that I had met a lot of other demons over the past few months.

Those encounters with demons from outside the prez’s circle were precious to me. I’d learned about discrimination and prejudice, dragons, and more. It was all good knowledge to have.

Power was important, too, of course, but if I was going to catch up to Vali, I

would need to learn all I could. Sadly, my dim-witted brain was at its limit! Oh, how I wished I had been born with natural smarts...

As I breathed a deep sigh, I caught sight of a small figure sauntering past.

It was Koneko.

For some reason, it appeared as though she wanted out of this party quickly. She looked to be preoccupied. Was something wrong? I found myself struck by a sense of unease.

“Asia, Xenovia, I’ll be right back,” I said.

“What is it, Issei?” Asia asked. “The Demon King will be greeting us all soon.”

“Don’t worry. I just want to say hello to someone I know. I’ll be back in a minute!”

“All right. We’ll be here,” Xenovia accepted with a nod.

“Thanks!”

I had just lied to both of them, but only so that this wouldn’t turn into a big deal. I stood up from my seat and took off after Koneko.

Did she take an elevator? Downstairs, maybe?

The doors to one of the elevators slid open, and I rushed inside. At that moment, someone else stepped in—the prez!

“What is it, Issei? You look pale.”

“I saw Koneko leaving, like she was chasing after something...”

“So you were worried about her, too. Okay then, let’s go find her together.”

“Yeah! But how did you know I was going to take the elevator?”

The prez responded to my question with a broad grin. “Because I’m always watching you.”



The elevator went all the way down to the first floor. There, the prez and I described Koneko’s appearance to anyone nearby, asking whether they had seen her.

After inquiring with a few people, we learned that she had been seen going outside. The prez hurriedly summoned one of her bat familiars, releasing it into the sky. She and I waited by the fountain in front of the entrance for it to return.

“My suspicions were correct. She *was* acting strangely...,” the prez muttered.

“Yeah. But who would she have followed all the way out here?” I wondered aloud.

At my question, Rias sank deep into thought. Judging by her grave expression, she must have been suspecting something serious. Or perhaps she had just realized something?

After a short while, her bat familiar returned.

“You’ve found her? The forest? Surrounding the hotel?”

The forest?! Koneko! What are you doing out there?!

The prez and I ran off in pursuit!

Leaving the brightly lit hotel behind, we sped through the night-shrouded woods. The trees and foliage hindered our movements somewhat, but not enough that we couldn’t run. Thanks to my survival lifestyle in the mountains, I was totally fine.

Azazel, it’s pretty crazy to see just how far I’ve come!

After a few minutes of dashing through the forest, the prez pulled me aside, and we hid in the shadow of a large tree. When I peeked my head out, I spotted Koneko!

She was scurrying around, tilting her head, glancing here and there. Clearly, she was searching for something.

Perhaps after locating whatever she was hunting, Koneko’s gaze trained on something in the distance.

The prez and I followed her line of sight.

“It’s been a long time,” called an unfamiliar voice.

Without making so much as a sound, a woman dressed in a black kimono

emerged from the shadows. In some ways, she reminded me of Koneko.

Hold on. She has cat ears?! I-it can't be...!

I felt like I had hit on something important, but the prez silently shushed me, motioning that it was best to watch on quietly.

“—! ...You!” Koneko exclaimed, her whole body trembling in visible shock.

“Hello, Shirone. It’s me, your sister.”

“*Shirone*”? I had never heard that name before, but could it have been Koneko’s true one? Rias’s mother had told me that *Koneko* was one Rias had given her.

“Kuroka... Sister!” Koneko squeaked out.

It was Koneko’s sibling! I had thought the two of them looked similar, and now I knew why!

So this beautiful lady is the nekomata who killed her master and became a stray... Will Koneko look like her when she gets older? Just trying to picture that was getting me riled up!

A black cat appeared from the darkness, snuggling up against the woman’s feet.

“I’m impressed that you managed to find your way here, Shirone. All it took was one black cat creeping into that party to lure you to me-ow.”

So that was it. Koneko had caught sight of that cat during the party and had followed it here.

“...Kuroka. What is all this about?” Koneko’s voice betrayed more than a hint of anger.

Her sister, however, smiled back at her, unfazed. “Don’t make such a scary face. I just have a little business to take care of. I heard that a lot of big-name demons were holding a party here, so I thought I’d take a look. *Meow*.” She held her hand up into the air like a cat’s paw and gave Koneko a wink!

Whoa! Talk about cute! Ghhk...! Don’t pinch my cheek like that, Prez...

“Ha-ha-ha! Don’t tell me this is a member of Gremory’s Familia?” inquired

someone new. Unfortunately, I recognized their voice.

Suddenly, a pretty boy wearing a full set of what looked like ancient Chinese armor appeared before us. It was that monkey Bikou, the descendent of Sun Wukong! He was Vali's buddy!

What's he doing here?! No, hold on. He's also a member of the Khaos Brigade! Are those terrorists planning an attack on the party?!

All of a sudden, Bikou's gaze turned to the prez and me! Had he realized we were here?!

"There's no point trying to hide. People like Kuroka and me, with our hermetic sage magic, we can sense you through even the smallest changes in your *qi*."

We'd been so easily discovered! I didn't want to fight him here if it could be helped!

Readying ourselves, the prez and I emerged from the shadow of the tree.

Koneko was startled at the sight of us both. "...Issei. President."

"Yo, you good-for-nothing monkey. How's Vali doing?" I asked.

"Ha-ha-ha. He's doing just fine... But you... You look like you've gotten a bit stronger."

Huh? Can he tell that just by looking at me?

Bikou must have been able to sense my confusion, because he flashed me a grin. "I told you, didn't I? I like to mess around with sage magic. I can sense your *qi*, your life energy. At least to an extent. And your aura is stronger than when we last met."

So that was it. If he was going to the effort of saying as much, then my training must have paid off.

"By the way, Prez, what's sage magic?" I inquired. "Is it the same as our demon powers or the magic that those magicians use?"

Rias let out a deep sigh at my question before explaining, "Sage magic is different from both our powers and those of magicians. Probably the most significant point of difference is that it focuses on *qi*, the primordial life force

that flows through all living things. We call it our auras; others call it their chakras. Sage magic uses that energy as its base. It has similarities and differences to both our abilities and the holy light used by angels. Its direct destructive potential isn't quite as potent as demon abilities, but it can draw on the untapped force flowing through plants, animals, and even other people. It's said that a proficient practitioner can track the movements of others over great distances by reading subtle shifts on the overall tapestry of auras—their *qi*, as they like to call it."

"By manipulating the flow of energy, you can strengthen your body both internally and externally or disrupt the force of all the trees around you to make them wither or bloom. Sage magic lets us manipulate the *qi* of anything, after all. We could cut off the flow to an opponent's life force to damage them. Compared with a demon's powers or a magician's sorcery, there aren't a whole lot of ways to repair damage to one's spiritual essence, so most people hit with an attack like that end up dying. *Meow.*" Koneko's sister gave me a cute wink as she wrapped up her explanation! She was so bubbly, but at the same time, so foreboding.

I didn't really understand the explanation particularly well, but altogether, they were saying that they made excellent scouts, right? And that they could exert control over their opponents using no more than a single finger?

It was a lot to take in, but there was a more pressing question.

"What are you doing here? Is this a terrorist attack?" I demanded outright.

The two members of the Khaos Brigade broke into laughter.

"No, we didn't come here for anything like that. We've just been instructed to wait on standby here in the underworld. We're off duty right now, and Kuroka wanted to take a peek at this demon party. She wouldn't be able to make her way home easily by herself, so that's why I'm here. Is that okay with you?"

This monkey guy was wasting his time blabbering on as much as he did. Still, so long as he wasn't lying, then it seemed like we weren't in danger for the moment.

Basically, Koneko's sister had sent a familiar—or whatever that black cat was—to spy in on the party. Koneko had then stumbled upon it by chance and had

followed it out here.

“Bikou, who’s this kid?” Koneko’s sister asked, pointing toward me.

“That’s the Red Dragon Emperor.”

At this, the older *nekomata*’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “*Meow?* Really? Heh... So this is that breast-obsessed kid who beat Vali?”

That’s what they think of me? Well, I suppose it’s true. The breast-obsessed Red Dragon Emperor. I can live with that.

Bikou let out a yawn. “Kuroka, let’s head back. There’s no point hanging around—they won’t let us join the fun.”

“Indeed. Let’s return to base. But I’m taking Shirone with me-ow, seeing as I left her behind last time.”

“Hey, come on now, that’ll get you on Vali’s bad side, you know?” Bikou objected.

“I’m sure both Ophis and Vali will consent once they realize she possesses the same powers as me-ow.”

“You may be right there. Still...”

A pleased grin crept across Kuroka’s face. That smile sent a visible shudder through Koneko’s petite body! She was terrified!

I stepped between the two siblings and addressed the elder sister. “Koneko is a valued member of Rias Gremory’s Familia. I won’t let you take her!”

Both Bikou and Kuroka chuckled in amusement.

“Heh, that’s brave of you, but you see... You can’t compete with Kuroka and me here. How’s this sound, a special deal just this once? If you give us the girl, we’ll get out of your hair. Sound good?”

That damn monkey! What the heck is he blathering about?! As if we would be okay with that?!

The prez, her expression indignant, stepped forward. “This girl is my servant. I won’t allow you to so much as lay a finger on her.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, what are you saying? She’s *my* sister. That gives me-

ow every right to take care of her. I won't give her to you, Miss High-Class Demon Lady."

Brrrrr.

The atmosphere of the forest clearing suddenly underwent a complete change. Both the prez and Koneko's sister were glaring at each other. It looked like things could explode at any moment!

It was Kuroka whose expression was the first to shift, her lips curling into a smirk. "You're a pain, *meow*. I should kill you now."

At that moment, an inexplicable feeling washed over me!

What's going on?!

It felt like I had been transported somewhere else! The scenery around us was unchanged, but the air and the mood were completely different...

"...Kuroka. So, you've learned how to manipulate space in addition to sage magic?" the prez asked, biting her lip in frustration.

Huh? Space?

"I still haven't mastered time yet, but space I can handle. Raising a barrier is pretty easy, *meow*. I've cut off this forest from the outside, so no matter how much we show off in here, no one is going to know. Don't expect any help to arrive. We're going to slaughter you in here, *meow*. Bye-bye!"

What?! So we're trapped in the forest?! And none of the others will even notice?! Argh! Were the two of them too much for the prez and me?! I wondered if trying to escape was the best option, but it sounded like that was impossible!

At that moment, a voice erupted from high above.

"When I heard that Lady Rias and Issei Hyoudou had entered the forest, I thought I had better take a look. Who would have guessed they would be sealed inside by a barrier like this?"

That voice! I looked up and found...

"Tannin!"

That old dragon geezer! What perfect timing! Man, I was so relieved! He must have arrived right before Koneko's sister had sealed us in.

"What a sinister aura. Such visitors aren't the kind who would be welcome at today's event," Tannin remarked.

Bikou, however, seemed to rejoice when he laid eyes on the dragon. "Whoa! Well, if it isn't the old Dragon King, Tannin the Blaze Meteor Dragon! We're in deep water now, Kuroka! We're gonna have to go all out here!"

"You look pleased with yourself, monkey lad. Very well. Not even Ophis will complain if two dragon-class opponents are involved."

Two?! Is he counting me?! Do I even have a say in this anymore?! I'm done for!

"Kinto'un!" Bikou cried out, a golden cloud rising beneath his feet and carrying him into the sky to meet Tannin! "Nyoibou!" Next, a long staff appeared in his hands as he flew straight for the dragon! "Extend!"

Whoosh!

The staff stretched as Bikou flew toward Tannin—but the dragon evaded with a speed that belied his huge size!

He's fast! How was he able to move so quickly with his massive frame?!

"Again!"

Once more, Bikou extended his staff, chasing after Tannin! Nonetheless, the old geezer used his wings to somersault through the air, dodging the blows again, before opening his mouth wide!

Fwooooooooooom!

Flames blanketed the sky! It was a heck of a lot more firepower than he had used when training me! It was like the entire sky was burning!

Azazel *had* said that Tannin's fire breath was as strong as a meteor impact!

More incredible yet was his agility! He was a gigantic monster, but he sure knew how to move! Come to think of it, he'd been swift during my training, too, enough to keep me on my toes constantly.

Are a Dragon King's stats just completely maxed out?!

"No, he's still holding back there," Ddraig said to me.

Seriously?! This isn't him going all out?! I thought back incredulously.

"If he unleashed his full potential, he would also end up destroying the party venue, not to mention us. He's a thoughtful one, in his own way. There are very few people who would be able to stop him in this state, though."

Such an overpowered guy had chased me around the mountain?! I was terrified for my past self!

Once the blanketing flames dissipated, Bikou was left floating in the air—his whole body smoking.

"Ha-ha-ha! Nice work, former Dragon King!"

He was laughing! His armor and clothes were charred black, but physically, he looked fine! How had he managed to survive an attack like that?! Perhaps I should have expected as much from a descendent of the legendary Monkey King!

"Hmph! So you're the scion of Sun Wukong! You look pleased to be facing the great Tannin!"

"The name's Bikou! Nice to meet ya, Dragon Chief!"

"Heh-heh-heh. You sure do gibber like a monkey. Do you truly understand who you're up against?"

"I'm the heir of a legendary monster. I'm not about to lose so easily."

"In any event, I'll be your opponent, monkey. Lady Rias, Issei Hyoudou, you two take care of the cat. You should be capable of that much."

That was easy for him to say! Were we really going to have to beat this feline lady?!

"Ha-ha-ha! This'll be fun! I'll take ya on!" Bikou exclaimed, utterly thrilled.

"Enough squealing. You are but a single measly baboon. You won't be any trouble. What happened to your pig and spirit friends? Did you break up with them?"

“You mean the descendants of Pigsy and Sandy? Ha-ha-ha! They’re too conservative, like everyone else in my family! The status quo suits them just fine! But I’m always looking for new ways to have fun! That’s why when the Khaos Brigade invited me to join, I was the first in line! And now I’m working with Vali, the White Dragon Emperor!”

“Hmph. Your temperament certainly resembles your ancestor’s. What are you scheming at with the White Dragon Emperor? Rumor has it that your unit moves independently of the others. And I hear yours is the only team that Ophis didn’t gift with one of his *serpents*!”

“If you wanna find out, you’ll have to beat me!”

“Watch your tongue, monkey! This is the underworld—the land of the dead! The perfect place for small fry like you to repent!”

Boom! Ba-dum!

The old dragon and the monkey began to wage fierce battle in midair! I wasn’t worried about the outcome, as Tannin shouldn’t have had much difficulty defeating Bikou. The problem was...

“*Meow.*” Koneko’s sister flashed us a bewitching smile, but I could’ve sensed the evil aura surrounding her from a mile away!

Azazel had a black energy to him as well, but his was more one of vice than wickedness. However, this one was malevolence through and through! And that murderous intent was directed straight at Rias and me!

“...Sis. I’ll go with you. Please let them both go.”

Why was Koneko talking like that all of a sudden?!

“What are you—?” I began, before the prez’s voice drowned me out.

“What are you saying?! Koneko?! You’re *my* servant, a member of *my* Familia! I won’t allow it!” She embraced the other girl in a hug!

Koneko, however, shook her head. “...It’s no good. I know my sister. Her power rivals the strongest high-class demon. Not even you or Issei... Even with the powers of a former Dragon King...against her sage magic and arcane powers, you won’t be able to stop her...”

“I don’t care! I’m not going to hand you over to her! Not to this *nekomata* who made your life so miserable!”

Kuroka smiled in response to the prez’s outrage. “Why would a *youkai* help another *youkai*? No, this time, I only want Shirone to use her as my tool. I understand her powers much better than you ever could, Miss Crimson-Haired Demon Lady.”

Koneko shook her head. “...No... I don’t want them... Those dark powers... All they do is cause suffering...” Her body was trembling, and tears were welling in the corners of her eyes.

The prez tightened her embrace. “Kuroka... Your strength has blinded you. The scars you’ve left on this child’s heart will never heal. When you slaughtered your master and disappeared from your sister’s life, she went through such agony. The first time I met her, there was nothing left inside—no emotions. The only family she ever knew betrayed her. She had no one to turn to, no future to rely on, scorned by other demons, despised and abused to the point where they were even preparing to end her life. She endured so many hardships. That’s why I want her to finally know joy! I want to give her a life of happiness! She’s Koneko Toujou now, a Rook in my Familia! A treasured member of my household! I won’t let you so much as touch her!”

At this, tears began to run down Koneko’s face.

Preeeeeeeeez! I, too, was overcome with emotion by her love! Ugh! She might not have been talking about me, but I wept as well! Those heartfelt words were more than any servant could ever hope for! The prez was the best! The strongest woman in the world, and my idol!

“...I don’t want to go... I’m Koneko Toujou. Kuroka... Sis... I won’t go with you! I want to live with President Rias! I want to live!” Koneko cried.

Whatever ties she still had with Kuroka, that declaration cut them.

All right! If that’s how it is, then I won’t hold back, either! I’ll protect her!

At this, Koneko’s sister curled her lips in a bitter smile as a chilling, scornful laugh clawed up her throat. “Then die.”

Ssssst.

A thin, mist-like substance began to waft around Kuroka. It spread gradually through the air, moving toward us. It didn't stop there, however, slowly engulfing the entire forest.

It wasn't so thick as to shroud our vision. Yet it brought a foreboding feeling and filled me with trepidation and a fearful shiver. The mere touch of this vapor —

“Ah.”

Thud.

That was when the prez collapsed to her knees by my side!

Huh? What's going on?!

“...That's...”

Koneko was the next to drop, covering her mouth with her hands. Had they both just been attacked?!

“Hmm, so my fog doesn't work against the Red Dragon Emperor? It's poisonous, you see, to demons and *yukai* alike. I've diluted it a little to make them suffer a bit while it spreads through their bodies. A quick death would be too merciful. I'm going to make this slow and painful. *Meow.*” Before I knew it, Kuroka had leaped up to a tree branch above and was watching us from her high perch!

A poison mist?! What a cruel, barbaric strategy! And so heartless! But it didn't work on me... Is that because of Ddraig?

I didn't wholly understand the reason, but that didn't matter.

The prez hurled a magic projectile at Kuroka. The blast sped right past me!

Boom!

The attack scored a direct hit! Koneko's sister vanished!

At least, that's what I'd thought at first. Judging by the prez's reaction, her attack hadn't found purchase.

“That was a decent shot. But no good. No, no, no. With my sage magic, I can easily fashion mirror images of myself,” echoed Kuroka's voice from several

places in the woods.

Out of nowhere, a series of figures emerged from the mist one after the other, each of them a young woman dressed in a black kimono! They were all Kuroka!

Illusions?!

They all looked so real that I couldn't tell the genuine one from the fakes! And they all had the same powerful aura around them!

"...If you can't read the flow of *qi*, you won't be able to win against a high-level practitioner of sage magic," Koneko coughed out, collapsing to all fours in pain!

Was there nothing I could do to neutralize the poison? Would Asia's healing ability have been of use? I couldn't be sure it would even work against something like this!

"Boosted Gear!"

I raised my gauntlet-clad left arm into the air—but the usual voice didn't respond back! I glanced at the jewel, only to find it sapped of color and filled not with light, but a grayish darkness! What was going on?!

"...Your Sacred Gear won't work here, partner."

Come on, Ddraig?! Why now of all times?! I hurriedly thought back.

"It's entered an obscure state."

"Obscure"?! What on earth is that supposed to mean?!

"Thanks to your training, you've reached a crossroads. One more push will probably be enough to change it, but I don't know whether that transformation will be a regular power-up or your Balance Breaker."

So my Sacred Gear is stuck while it works out how to level up?

"Yes, to put it simply. Now that the available options have multiplied so dramatically, the Boosted Gear's system is uncertain which option to pursue."

Does that mean I can choose one option or the other? What about both?

"Anything's possible. You may be able to emerge victorious using a normal

increase in strength, but you won't be able to achieve your Balance Breaker without a dramatic emotional shift. Just know this: Right now, you have an opportunity to unlock it. The rest is up to you."

That was all well and good, but what was I supposed to do...? My Sacred Gear wanted some kind of major change? What exactly did it need?! Had I known this would happen, I would've asked Kiba what he had gone through when he'd released his!

Hey, Ddraig. Will it matter if I forget about the Balance Breaker for now and go for the regular power-up?

"There's no telling when you'll be able to try again. It might be months, or even years, before you get another chance."

Talk about a rare opportunity! Opting out of this shot at my Balance Breaker would be a colossal waste! Still, I didn't know what to do! Oh, how I wished someone could just tell me!

"Oh dear, our itsy-bitsy Red Dragon Emperor can't activate his Sacred Gear? And I'm about to attack, *meow*."

With that, one of Kuroka's apparitions stretched out her hands and released a mass of powerful energy at the prez and Koneko, who were already writhing in agony from the poison!

Cut it out! I leaped between the girls and the blast to protect them!

Booooooooooom!

"Gwah!"

Devastating pain racked my body! Dammit, it hurt! It huuuuurt! I'd taken the full force of that attack!

A huge gash had been torn into my uniform, leaving my chest stark naked! A small stream of blood was running down my skin, too.

"Issei..."

The prez tried to take a step toward me, but Kuroka's toxin had weakened her to the point that she couldn't stand properly!

“Prez! Don’t move! You’ll make the poison spread quicker! Don’t worry, that was nothing more than a—”

Boooooooooooooom!

Before I could finish what I was saying, another surge of energy slammed into me.

Unlike with the first strike, I wasn’t able to prepare myself this time. The agony was beyond anything I could’ve imagined!

After only two hits, I was on my knees. This was bad. If Kuroka was this strong, I’d be down for the count after only a few more blows...

“How weak. And you’re supposed to be Vali’s rival? Did you really drive him off?” Kuroka sneered my way.

Heh-heh-heh... How many times will I have to put up with people like her looking down on me...? I thought sardonically. *I’m pathetic. I can’t even use my powers when I need to.*

It was always like this. When it came down to the wire, I was worthless. Helping Asia? Saving the prez?

Everyone praised me for things like that, but the truth wasn’t so rosy! Asia had died because of me! The prez had wept on account of my failure!

I’d failed to help them both in time. Both tragedies were my fault.

Powers that wouldn’t work until someone I cared about got hurt... That wasn’t right! And now it was about to repeat all over again...

Koneko was suffering.

Because I wasn’t strong enough, the people I cared about had to endure so much pain.

In every instance, I had only been able to help them on the second attempt thanks to the assistance of others.

What kind of legendary dragon wasn’t even able to rescue those precious to him on the first try?!

“I won’t let you hurt the prez or Konekooooo!”

Boooooom!

I was thrown backward by another blast and sent crashing into a huge tree!

Gah... A blow from behind.

The pain was so great that I felt my consciousness wavering for a moment. I couldn't move...!

More than the aching, the shock to my spine had left me immobile. I was still alert, but that was all.

"Dammit..."

I—I cried. Not from the pain—I was so unsightly, so pathetic that I couldn't stop myself from weeping.

It was beyond mortifying.

Unable to call up my powers even when driven into a corner... I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I didn't want to lose my friends. Yet I couldn't draw on my abilities until it was already too late...

Sobbing tears of frustration, I crawled along the ground to where Koneko and the prez lay.

Reaching them, I did everything I could to muster my energy.

"Nghhhhh!"

Ignoring the pain as best I was able, I pulled myself up on my shaky legs.

Okay. At least I can still stand.

But still, the tears wouldn't stop.

"I don't care if you're her sister... I won't forgive anyone who makes Koneko cry...", I declared.

However, it only served to amuse Kuroka. "That's rich coming from a weak, miserable creature like you... Poor Shirone. It might be nice having a cool, gallant prince brandish a sword in your defense, but a mud-caked, blood-soaked imbecile like you? You're disgusting, *meow*."

"...Issei," Koneko murmured.

I gave her a forced smile. “Koneko... I might be the vessel of a legendary dragon, but I can’t do anything... If I had only been stronger when Asia and the prez needed me, if I had been able to use the dragon’s power, I might have been able to protect them both... But as a demon, I’m useless, incompetent...”

Even when the chips were down, I couldn’t activate my Sacred Gear. Honestly, what was I even doing?

“All the previous vessels of the Red Dragon Emperor were able to unlock their Balance Breakers quickly... I’m the only one who has spent months on it, and I still haven’t managed to pull it off. I knew it would be like this. I knew it from the very beginning. The Red Dragon Emperor’s supposed to be incredible, but I’m still unreliable. I’m useless. I’m a waste of a demon... I’m not good enough... There’s nothing I can do, Koneko...”

The white-haired girl shook her head, however. “...You aren’t worthless, Issei... Don’t you know? Most of the previous Red Dragon Emperor hosts drowned in their might... They were swallowed up by it... My sister is the same... Even if you have power...you’ll end up losing control without a kind heart... But you’re gentle, Issei... Even if you aren’t as strong... I think it’s wonderful... You’re probably the first nice Red Dragon Emperor. So...” She paused there, smiling at me despite her pain. “Be a gentle Welsh Dragon.”

Koneko... I...

Hearing her words, I came to a sudden realization.

“Prez. I think I know what I need to do to unlock my Balance Breaker.”

Yes, I could see the truth in what Koneko had said.

“But I’m going to need your help, Prez.”

If I can borrow her power...

“...All right! I’ll do anything I can! What should I do?” Though clearly in agony from the toxin, Rias nodded to my request.

Affirming my resolve, I took a deep breath and stated, “Please let me touch your breasts.”

“—!”

The prez was left speechless by my request. Nonetheless, after giving it some thought, a look of determination filled her eyes. "...Okay. If that's what you need..."

I was taken aback by how willingly she consented! This was insane! Was she truly going to go along with it?! She wasn't joking?! I could really dig my fingers into them?!

"R-really?! I can touch them?! I can push them with my fingertips?! You're okay with that?!"

Plop!

With trembling hands, she pulled down the top of her dress, offering me her glorious naked chest! With nothing left to hold them in place, they bounced up and down wonderfully!

My nose spurted blood at this raw, beautiful sight!

"...Be quick. Th-this is embarrassing..." Her complexion was both pale from the poison and scarlet with bashfulness.

I'm sorry, Prez! I had no idea it would turn out like this!

"H-hey?! What are you doing?! We're in the middle of a battle!" Tannin gawked from up above.

"Old man! Cover me while I poke the prez's nipples!"

The old dragon's eyes all but popped out of his head at this. "Poke her nipples?! Poke them, you say?! Did you forget we're fighting?!"

"If I do this, there's a good chance I might unlock my Balance Breaker!"

"So all that training I gave you meant nothing?! You're a bigger fool than I thought!"

This time, it was Kuroka's turn to look at us with a bewildered expression "Hey, Bikou? What kind of strategy is this? Rias Gremory is flashing her breasts, like she's planning to get up to something nasty with the Red Dragon Emperor."

"How would I know?! The Red Dragon Emperor's mind works on a completely different plane of existence from ours!" Bikou replied.

That impertinent monkey! I was being serious! If I was going to unlock my Balance Breaker, the most surefire way was through the prez's boobs!

My conversation with Azazel had left a dramatic impression on me. And the first substantial change that came to mind after talking with Koneko was feeling up Rias's tits.

I mean, that was all I had been able to think about since Azazel had suggested the idea to me! I was totally possessed by the thought! If I poked them, I was sure to undergo an earth-shattering transformation!

Unfortunately, with those breasts directly in front of me, I found myself wavering. Uh-oh. This was bad!

"O-old geezer! I'm in trouble!" I called to Tannin.

"What now?!" the dragon shouted back.

This was the kind of dilemma best entrusted to a former Dragon King!

"Right or left?! Which do I choose?!"

"You idiooooot! They're both the same! Just do it already!"

"Damn you! There is a difference! This is important! My first pair of breasts! My life depends on this! Seriously, answer meeeee!"

For some reason, I found myself arguing with Tannin over this! He just didn't understand! The choice was paramount!

"Prez! What do you think?!"

Now that it had come to this, I had no choice but to ask the person in question herself!

"Argh! Idiot! Just grab both of them at the same time!"

"—?!"

What a revolutionary idea! My master's response was music to my ears!

I aimed my index fingers at both of her breasts. This was it. I couldn't miss.



My body was in bad shape from Kuroka's attacks, but the prospect of pushing my fingers into those breasts had reinvigorated me!

Then, catching my breath, I stepped forward.

Bounce.

Bounce, bounce, bounce...

The elasticity, the softness, the texture of her skin; yep, the prez's tits were the best! Without pushing too hard, I gently buried my fingers into them.

I burst into a nosebleed at the sight of her flesh wrapping around my fingers. And then...

"...Nnh," her voice leaked out.

It was a small sound, but I had heard it all the same!

Inside me, something earth-shattering began to burst open and spread until it took over my mind.

Amid my tears, I saw it.

The beginning of the universe.

"You've done it. You've really done it!" Ddraig rejoiced inside me.

"Welsh Dragon: Balance Breaker!"

The light had returned to the jewel embedded in my gauntlet. No, it was glowing with an intensity I had never seen before! Its aura enveloped my whole body!

"...You're the worst. A disgusting Red Dragon Emperor..." Though her face was ghastly pale, Koneko still managed to lay into me.

Forgive me! I know, I'm the most lecherous of Red Dragon Emperors!

At that moment... The energy that had wrapped around my body solidified into a set of crimson armor.

"My Balance Breaker, the Boosted Gear Scale Mail! I've unlocked it thanks to my master's breasts!"

Boooooom!

My aura released a tremendous explosion of power, blowing away the fog surrounding me and gouging a crater into the ground!

All right, now this is power! My Balance Breaker!

“Good work, partner. But you’re an awful one, that’s for sure. You’re going to make me cry for real sooner or later,” Ddraig praised. He had no face, but I got the feeling there were tears in his eyes.

Ah, thanks. And sorry for being such a pervert! So what’s my status? I inquired mentally.

“You should be able to maintain your current state for thirty minutes. Your training has paid off. Considering how weak you were to start with, that’s a decent length of time.”

How many times can I boost my power to the max?

“If you go that far, you will likely burn out within five minutes. That gives you five attempts at most. By the sixth one, you will be as good as spent. The same goes for transferring your strength.”

So if I use my powers well, I can fight for around fifteen minutes, then.

“You won’t need that much. Look, stick out your hand and try throwing an energy ball like you usually do.”

I did as instructed, pointing my arm at Koneko’s sister.

An energy sphere launched immediately, passing right by its target and disappearing far into the forest.

And then—a brilliant flash of red light filled my vision.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The roar of a tremendous explosion, though far in the distance, ripped through the area!

Huh...? What? I didn’t know how to react.

The shock wave dispersed the rest of Kuroka’s poison fog instantly.

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s been a long time since I’ve seen *that*! Issei Hyoudou! You’ve destroyed the entire mountain ahead, not to mention the barrier closing us in

here!” Tannin called out from up above.

A mountain?! I had wiped a whole mountain off the face of the earth?! I hadn’t even put much effort into that!

“With that kind of attack, you can channel the power coursing through your aura into your hands. You still can’t store much, though, so rapid-fire isn’t an option.”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! At last! Yes, I see! What raw power! That’s what a good aura does for you!” Tannin exclaimed while laughing.

Thanks, old geezer! Your training sessions have really paid off!

If Kuroka’s spatial enclosure was gone, everyone outside had probably realized what was going on in here.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Curiously, Kuroka had started to howl with delight. “Ha! This is fun! Then how about we try mixing sage magic and *youkai* abilities?” she said, a different power gathering in each of her fists.

Fwhoosh!

Like that, she began to loose alternating waves of two forms of energy! I met them all head-on!

Th-thud!

I felt the impact of the strikes, but there was no pain. Smoke billowed up from my armor, but it was undamaged—as durable and robust as ever!

“Is that it?” I taunted.

Kuroka’s eyes widened in shock to see that I had suffered no damage. “It didn’t do anything?! Impossible! I put a lot of *youkai* power into that!”

Fwish!

I leaped forward, closing the distance between us in an instant!

“Don’t get cocky!”

Kuroka hurled more surges of power at me, but I plowed through them, flicking them away as I drew near!

Vrrrrr!

I slammed my fist forward—but stopped it just a hair away from her nose. The air around us vibrated audibly, the leaves of the trees trembling loudly from the force.

Then, standing directly in front of my awestruck opponent, I stated, “Don’t you dare make my cute underclassman cry.”

“...”

“The next time you come after her, I won’t hold back. You may be a woman—Koneko’s sister, even—but you’re *my* enemy!”

The second I pulled away, Kuroka immediately sprang back to get away from me. “...You damn brat!”

She could curse me all she wanted, but I could see the fear in her eyes. She was probably terrified by the sense of immense pressure my armor was giving off. At times like this, a full-body set of intimidating armor could prove surprisingly effective.

Watching from a short distance away, Bikou broke out into shrill laughter. “Hya-ha-ha-ha! Now we’re talking! Two dragon kingpins! I ain’t gonna lie; I’m enjoying this!”

He spun his Nyoibou around over his head, clearly willing to keep on fighting. Was he obsessed with combat, the way that Vali was? Seriously, why did my opponents always have to be this level of crazy? There were better ways to pass one’s time than fighting! Didn’t they want to be popular with the ladies? Our values were so different that I couldn’t understand his motives at all!

No matter how I thought about it, there was nothing more fun than rubbing the prez’s breasts!

Well, anyway. It probably wouldn’t be too hard for me to take him down now. With Kuroka’s poison fog out of the way, the prez and Koneko looked to be on the mend.

Which meant it was four against two! We could do this! It wouldn’t be long before others came to help us now that Kuroka’s barrier was gone!

But just as we readied ourselves to keep going, a rift opened up in the air before us. *What?!*

A young, bespectacled man wearing a suit emerged from that spatial tear. In his hands, he gripped a blade charged with an incredible sacred aura.

H-hold on there, is that...a Holy Sword?

“That’s enough, Bikou, Kuroka. The other demons are aware of your presence,” he said.

Was he an ally?! Another member of the Khaos Brigade?!

Swoosh.

Bikou glided down from above. “You’re Vali’s attendant, right?”

The man let out a sigh. “Kuroka was taking longer than anticipated, so I came to check on her. And now I find Bikou here, too. What exactly are you two doing?”

“Everyone, stay back! That weapon he’s holding is dangerous!” Tannin called out to us. “It’s the Collbrande, though you may know it by the name Caliburn—the most powerful Holy Sword ever made. To think it’s now under the control of the White Dragon Emperor...” The old dragon let out a wry chuckle.

The strongest Holy Sword in the world?! Did that mean it was mightier than Kiba’s and Xenovia’s weapons, too?

“And that second one... It’s also a Holy Sword, no?” Tannin questioned.

The man motioned to the other weapon sheathed at his waist. “This is the recently rediscovered final Excalibur, the strongest of the seven—Excalibur Ruler.”

An Excalibur?! From what I had heard, the original Excalibur had been broken into seven pieces in the distant past, but one of them had long been missing... Was this really it?

“Are you fine spilling all that?” Kuroka asked him.

The man nodded. “Oh yes. In truth, I’m quite interested in this group myself. Red Dragon Emperor, do pass my greetings along to your Holy Demon Sword

wielder and the lady with Durendal, won't you? I would like to face them myself one day, one swordsman to another."

What a fearless attitude. I wondered how Kiba and Xenovia would react when they heard about this guy.

"Now then, let's be off."

With that, the man cut another rift through the air with the Collbrande, wide enough for several people to pass through.

"Farewell for now, Red Dragon Emperor."

The bespectacled man and Vali's two comrades disappeared through the spatial tear.

Shortly afterward, the other demons from the party, sensing trouble, came to meet us, and the festivities were abruptly canceled due to the attack from the Khaos Brigade.

[Odin](#)

"Now that's a blunder."

This was the first thing my deputy, Lieutenant Governor Shemhazai, said upon entering the conference room in the Demon King's territory.

That's an understatement, thought I—Azazel—as I sipped at a cup of tea.

On the day of the Demon King's little party, the Khaos Brigade had launched an attack. More precisely, they'd intruded upon demonic terrain, and the situation had progressed into an attack.

No one had anticipated that Kuroka, the super S-ranked stray demon wanted throughout the underworld, might use a familiar to spy on the party from within.

Fortunately, Rias Gremory's Familia and the ultimate-class demon Tannin drove her off.

The situation was resolved with minimal damage, but the security at the party had been easily exploited. This caused the other major powers to call into question the strictness of demon safety measures.

And so Shemhazai was incensed, as were the seraphs of heaven. Well, I couldn't say that I was happy with it, either, but I had no right to criticize them, seeing as I had let myself get preoccupied in the hotel's casino while the whole thing unfolded. Still, this violation of our treaty, and so soon, was a problem. A serious one.

Shemhazai continued with his report: "The intruders—Bikou, Kuroka, and the user of the Holy Sword Collbrande—belong to the Khaos Brigade's special autonomous unit, Team Vali. All three of those individuals possess enormous strength and power... And the way these demons have been managing the situation..."

Shemhazai could go on for hours when he got wound up like this. Now we were in for it.

The incident was already under control. Rias and Koneko had been exposed to poison, but fortunately, they received immediate treatment and suffered only minor illness. Heck, given that everyone was safe and well, this could be viewed as a fortunate miscalculation on the part of the Khaos Brigade. Thanks to them, Issei had managed to unlock his Balance Breaker. Everyone here understood that.

The Demon King's precious little sister was safe, and the Red Dragon Emperor had taken his first significant step forward. The party might have been canceled, but this was a big win in the broader scheme of things.

Across the room from me sat Tannin, in a miniaturized form, and the other big-name demons, eagerly discussing the upcoming contest between Sona Sitri and Rias Gremory.

"I guess I'll throw my weight behind Lady Rias. After all, I trained the Red Dragon Emperor personally, and he fights for her. Heh-heh-heh, he's an interesting kid. Obsessed with breasts..."

"The knowledge that Azazel has brought to the Rating Game looks like it will usher in a veritable revolution. They might upend the rankings within a year at this rate."

"That would be nice. The top ten hasn't changed in decades. We might finally get something interesting to watch for once."

Since our agreement, there'd been zero tension between us. Were the three great powers really fine with things being like this?

The doors to the room suddenly swung open, and all fell into dumbfounded silence.

"Hmph. Don't you striplings know how to greet an old man properly?"

It was a one-eyed elderly figure wearing a worn hat, with a white beard so long that it almost reached the floor. He was dressed in a simple, unadorned robe and was carrying a cane, though he didn't look to have any trouble with his back.

"Odin."

Yes indeed, this was the great Norse god himself, Odin! An armor-clad maiden, a Valkyrie, was accompanying him.

"Oooh, long time no see, you old northern country goat!"

Odin stroked his whiskers at my provocative greeting. "Indeed, fallen angel brat. Seems you've been cozying up to your long-time foes... Don't tell me you're up to no good again?"

"Ha! Unlike you old Norse god codgers with your endless rules and customs, *we're* open to new ways of thinking! We've decided to give up our pointless animosity and focus on growth and progress."

"Weak. That's the mentality of a beaten dog. You're no more than a gathering of aimless children, lost without your God and Demon Kings."

That old bastard... His tongue was as sharp as ever.

"It's called standing on your own two feet, you wrinkly scumbag."

"Watching you young'uns fooling around like this... It's enough to make me laugh."

Tch. This wasn't going to get us anywhere. Thankfully, at that moment, Sirzechs stood up from his seat to greet the old fart.

"Welcome, Odin, Great Lord of the North."

"Sirzechs. I'm here on your invitation to watch this Rating Game of yours. But

I see you're having a hard time of things. The White Dragon Emperor is the offspring of the original Lucifer, and a terrorist, no less. You demons have an uncertain future ahead of you." Odin's voice was dripping with mockery, but Sirzechs's smile remained unwavering.

Next, Odin shifted his gaze to Serafall. "By the way, Serafall, what exactly is that outfit supposed to be?"

The woman in question was dressed as a magical girl from a Japanese television anime. She was a cosplayer through and through.

"Oh, Mr. Odin! Don't you know? I'm a magical girl!" she declared, spinning around and making a peace sign with her fingers.

Did she realize she was addressing an old Norse god?

"Hmm. So that's what passes for popular among you young'uns these days? Not bad. Hmm, hmm. Yes, not bad at all..."

That ancient lecher. Cupping his chin with his hand, he was all but ogling Serafall's legs and panties.

The Valkyrie maiden placed herself between the Norse god and the Demon King. "Lord Odin, you mustn't be so lewd! Think of what you will do to the good name of Valhalla!"

"Geez, you're so uptight. This is why you can never find a good hero to date."

The Valkyrie broke into tears at Odin's harsh comment.

Hey, hey, what's with these two?

"I-I'm just an old warrior maiden with no history of love or relationships! You think I don't want a boyfriend? I *do*! Ughhhhh!"

Odin let out a deep sigh.

That dusty fossil. Didn't he know that you should only make a young woman cry in bed?

"Sorry about her. This is my current attendant. She has a nice figure, but she's too stuffy. She can't attract a man, either."

Just how did that stick-in-the-mud select his staff? How was *she* supposed to

protect *him*? She would've made a good straight man for him in the comedy industry.

Odin turned to Sirzechs. "I know all about what's going on. Sirzechs, Serafall, your siblings are going to fight, no? Making your precious sisters wage war against each other for your own entertainment—and two friends, no less. You truly are demons in every sense of the word."

"If she can't pull through a trial like this, the future of demonkind will stagnate."

"My Sona is going to win, of course!"

Each Demon King was convinced that their sibling would emerge triumphantly.

"Well then," Odin began, brazenly sitting himself down in an empty seat. "Your scuffle with the Khaos Brigade is all well and good, but I'm here to watch your Rating Game. When is it going to start?"

All talk about the incident at the party was postponed, and the topic of conversation turned to the upcoming match. Guests from each of the three major factions, as well as other groups, had been invited to observe, after all.

I stood up from my seat for a moment to take a break and made my way to a sofa out in the corridor. All this discussion with important figures in the conference room was making my shoulders feel stiff.

Before long, Sirzechs joined me. Had he decided to slip out, too? He sat down at my side before addressing me. "Azazel, do you mind if I ask you something before the Rating Game?"

"What?"

"If you were facing Rias, which of her Familia members would you remove from the playing field?"

"Issei, of course. His absence would affect everyone else. Issei's the one who keeps them all fired up, after all."

A positive mindset was vital when it came to battle. It wasn't uncommon for that alone to shift the balance in a match, to decisively destroy an opposing

team's sense of stability. Or the opposite, too.

Issei was an emotional pillar for Rias and the others. I could understand why. He was constantly throwing himself into everything he did, always charging full steam ahead without giving up, no matter what. That quality of his fed into the energies of his comrades. Even his master, Rias, was dependent on him in that sense.

It was commonplace for dragons to attract others to them, and Issei was no exception. That power had saved them all from more than one pinch.

Sirzechs laced his fingers, his expression serious. "...Sona will no doubt have realized that."

Was he worried about his little sister?

I decided to give him my honest appraisal. "Yeah, the problem is what happens after he's removed from the board. Will Rias's Familia rally, or will they succumb to despair? They've never had to watch their Red Dragon Emperor get dragged down before their very eyes."

Life.4

Prez vs. Chairwoman, Part 1!

We all gathered in Azazel's room for our last meeting the night before our decisive match against the Sitri Familia.

Matters concerning Bikou and Koneko's sister seemed to have been put aside for the time being, since Tannin and I had managed to drive them both away.

There was some suggestion that the prez had gained more prestige from the outcome of the encounter, seeing as we had repelled Vali's group and unlocked my Balance Breaker. Evidently, those were both highly regarded developments.

It sounded like she hadn't mentioned that I'd attained my Balance Breaker through touching her breasts, though. There was no way she could report such a thing.

The first thing Azazel did was question me. "Issei, what's the status of your Balance Breaker?"

"Right. I've managed to unlock it, but there are still a few conditions." I began to explain them one by one.

Although I could call upon my Boosted Gear Scale Mail, using it freely was still a distant goal.

"First, when I activate my Balance Breaker, it takes a bit of time to complete the transformation. The jewel on the back of my gauntlet shows a countdown until it's finished. Also, I can't use my Sacred Gear during that time. I can't double my power or transfer it to anyone else. There's no way to stop the countdown once it's started, either. I can only use it once a day, and even if I release the Balance Breaker state early, my Sacred Gear will still lose most of its power."

Azazel nodded. "Ah, so my data was right. Most previous Red Dragon

Emperors were the same. However, there were a few who could still use their Sacred Gear after dismissing the armor. Anyway, how long do you need to transform?”

“Two minutes.”

“You should be able to reduce that with training, once you get used to it. For now, those two minutes mean the difference between life and death. To put this bluntly, you’ll be useless in battle during that time. Practically anyone will be able to take you down. You’ll have to think hard about how to keep safe while you’re transforming. Those two minutes are your greatest weakness.”

I’d only recently unlocked my Balance Breaker, and already Azazel was criticizing it right to my face. I should have expected as much. But that did make my first objective relatively clear. What was I supposed to do during those two minutes? Run away?

“Your Boosted Gear’s normal abilities, its doubling and transferring ones, are still important given their versatility, but your Balance Breaker will be indispensable when facing strong foes. They each have their own strengths and weaknesses. So how long does your Balance Breaker last?”

“At its full strength, thirty minutes. The more I use my power, the shorter the time.”

“Not bad for your first use. We owe that to your training. But it won’t be enough in an official Rating Game. Even the full thirty minutes is still too little. Games can go on for a long time. We’re going to have to think of ways to increase that maximum.”

After everything I’d done, I still hadn’t grown enough. When would I be able to catch up to Vali?

It made sense that the usefulness of a Balance Breaker depended on the time and place, however. Achieving mine was a significant milestone, but depending on the battle situation, there would still be times when using my regular abilities was the better option.

Fortunately, I could still transfer energy in Balance Breaker mode, but that greatly increased the likelihood of my running out of gas. That was fine so long

as I could defeat my opponents first, but it was still a risky tactic. Yep, this was a tough one.

As I racked my slow, befuddled brain, Azazel flashed me a lecherous look and made a poking gesture with his finger. I responded with a grin, sticking my finger into the air the same way he was.

With that, he offered to shake my hand, which I readily accepted!

Yep, Teach! I did it! I unlocked my Balance Breaker by poking the prez's breasts!

We communicated all this in silence! We were both overflowing with emotion when we turned back to the matter at hand.

“Rias, how much does Sona Sitri know about your Familia?” Azazel inquired.

“I’m sure she has at least a rough idea of each of our skills and abilities. For example, she knows about Issei’s, Kiba’s, Akeno’s, Asia’s, and Xenovia’s main weapons and fighting styles. Our match against Riser’s Familia was widely viewed, after all. Gasper’s Sacred Gear and Koneko’s background are fairly public information, too.”

“So she has a decent grasp on all of you, then? And what do you know about her side?”

“I’m familiar with what Sona can do. The same goes for her Queen, her vice-chairwoman, along with several other members of her Familia. I’ve yet to confirm some of their skills, though.”

“So we’re the ones at a disadvantage. Well, that’s often the case when it comes to Rating Games and actual battles. We can’t discount the possibility of Sacred Gears evolving and changing mid-combat, too. There will be no letting down your guard. You’re facing eight opponents,” Azazel cautioned.

“Yes, one King, one Queen, one Rook, one Knight, two Bishops, and two Pawns. From the look of it, she hasn’t used all her pieces yet, but she’s still equal in number to us,” answered Rias.

With Azazel here, the discussion just kept going on and on! The prez wore a serious expression and listened to him intently.

Let me sum it up for you: Our opponents were a team of eight, and there were eight of us as well. The prez, Akeno, Kiba, Koneko, Asia, Xenovia, Gasper, and me. It was an even match in terms of numbers.

Next, Azazel began to jot down some notes and a graph on the whiteboard. “In the Rating Game, players are divided into four general fighting types: Power, Technique, Wizard, and Support. Of these, Rias is a Wizard-type, as is Akeno. These combatants excel in a variety of magic abilities. Kiba is a Technique-type with impressive speed and skills. Xenovia is a Power-type with excellent speed, the kind of player who can aim for a one-hit kill. Asia and Gasper are both Support types. To analyze them both a little deeper, Asia also leans toward being a Wizard-type, while Gasper is closer to a Technique-type. Koneko is a Power-type. And lastly, we’ve got Issei. You’re also a Power-type. However, with your Gift ability, you’re good at functioning as a Support-type player as well.”

This was a lot to remember all of a sudden. Azazel was saying that there were a bunch of common fighting styles and strategies among Familia members competing in Rating Games. Evidently, I was a Power-type fighter with some Support-type abilities.

Azazel drew vertical and horizontal axes across the whiteboard, dividing it into four quadrants and writing the names of each type above each square.

Next, he began to place a number of dots along the graph to illustrate our respective abilities and type affinities. He put me in the Power category, but not too far from the Support area. Kiba was in the Technique box. Xenovia was in the Power-type area, and the other members were clearly spread out in other portions of the chart.

Looking at it this way, we formed a pretty balanced team. That said, we didn’t have a Wizard-type who also had some talent in the Power category. In other words, we didn’t have an Armamentalist among our ranks.

Our instructor drew a circle around me, Xenovia, and Koneko in the Power category. “What Power-type combatants need to be most wary of are Counter-types—a particularly troublesome subclass of Technique-type players. When fighting opponents with Counter-type Sacred Gears, Power-type fighters like

Issei, Koneko, and Xenovia may have their strength turned against them. These kinds of enemies essentially reflect your attack back at you, combined with their own strength. The stronger you are, the worse the damage a Counter-type battler can deal you.”

It was certainly an intimidating idea, having my blows thrown back. If that happened while I was using my Balance Breaker, it might take out a few of us at the same time.

“If they have any people like that, I’ll just have to push through with raw power,” Xenovia declared boldly.

Azazel, however, shook his head. “You might be able to get by with that in some cases, but not if your opponent is particularly skilled in reversals. The best course is to refrain from attacking them as much as possible. Counter-type fighters are much better dealt with using spell casters like Akeno or Technique-type warriors such as Kiba. Even Gasper’s special vampire skills would do well. It’s all about compatibilities, advantages, and weaknesses. Power-type fighters are strong, but there’s a lot of risk involved if they take on a Technique-type fighter.”

Xenovia offered nothing in response to Azazel’s explanation. Given her abundance of combat experience, she probably recognized the truth to what he was saying.

Our instructor turned to me. “Issei, you’ve unlocked your Balance Breaker, but do you think you can win against Kiba?”

“...To be frank, with his speed, I probably wouldn’t be able to get in a hit.”

That was my honest opinion. It was undoubtedly true that my Balance Breaker possessed immense destructive potential. However, if I were to go up against Kiba, I doubted I would win. I mean, I had just unlocked mine, while he’d had his for more than a month now. More than anything, however, there was a vast gulf between our respective levels of combat experience.

The strength I’d used when fighting against Vali had been temporary. It was only because he’d gotten me so pissed that I’d been able to call upon it at all. Under normal circumstances, I simply wasn’t strong enough.

“Exactly. Whether you’re fighting Kiba or anyone else, you leave openings for reversals. Issei, if you don’t work out some way of dealing with Counter-type fighters, you’ll never be able to best someone like Kiba. That’s what battle compatibility is all about.”

Ugh, so my first obstacle is that pretty boy? If I can’t pass this hurdle, Vali will probably forever be out of reach...

Azazel’s eyes then fell upon the prez. “Rias, if Sona Sitri’s Familia has any fighters who specialize in counters, they could end up taking Issei out in a single blow. They could turn his enormous power back on him in an instant. You’ll need to devise some sort of strategy to cope with that possibility.”

“But if he’s fighting a woman...that won’t be easy,” the prez responded. At first, I wasn’t sure what she meant, but then it dawned on me.

“...Dress Break. He’s the enemy of all women. I don’t think anyone will want to fight him.” Koneko’s retort was biting!

That remark scored a critical hit on me! Somewhere along the way, I’d become the enemy of women! The prez was nodding in agreement! It was unanimous!

Right, any girl on the opposing team wouldn’t want to fight a guy who could make their clothes come flying off so easily!

It looked like Koneko was back to her old self. That was a relief. Given what had happened the other day, I’d been worried about her. Had she perhaps managed to overcome her issues?

Still, this was a problem. I’d spent a lot of my time devising a new ability during my training, but I might not have the chance to face any female opponents... As if to salt the wound, I’d actually be able to pull it off now that I had unlocked my Balance Breaker. My new skill was a different style of attack from my Dress Break.

“By the way, Issei, Sona Sitri is undoubtedly aware that you achieved your Balance Breaker during Bikou and Kuroka’s attack. You should keep your wits about you. They’ll likely try to defeat you before you can complete your transformation.”

So Teach was concerned about me...? I flashed him a forced smile. “Hmm. Don’t worry about me. I’m an adult,” I replied with a grin as I brushed my hair to one side.

“What’s up with you? You look like you’ve matured,” Azazel remarked.

“Teach. I’m all grown up now. I mean, I got a chance to poke at them, you know?” I nodded, giving him a thumbs-up.

Yep, I had reached an exceptional level of existence, climbing the steps of adulthood.

“Ah, got it, got it.”

Teach, don’t act dismissive. I’ve reached the cusp of a new plane of being.

“Kiba,” I said, putting my hands on his shoulders.

“What?” he returned with a puzzled expression.

I stared into his face with an enlightened grin as I told him the good news. “There are two kinds of men—those who have poked breasts, and those who haven’t. I’m the former. It’s amazing. Nothing compares. I’ve crossed over to the other side.”

That sounded like a pretty clever statement to my ears.

Heh-heh-heh. Kiba, you’re a lucky dude. You get to hang around with me, a guy who has pressed his fingers into a woman’s breasts!

Against all expectations, Kiba looked upon me with pity, shaking his head back and forth. “...President, this is no good. We should see that Issei gets some counseling before the match...”

Now that I had risen to enlightenment, it seemed pretty boy could no longer comprehend my words. Still, that wasn’t Kiba’s fault. I was the sinner here, the one who had sunk his digits into the prez’s breasts.

Yes, I’m a wicked creature. From now on, I’ll have to be known as the Darkness Welsh Dragon. Heh-heh-heh.

“I’m scared... Issei’s smile is so creepy...”

“...Stay away from him, Gaspy. He’ll infect you with his disease.”

Gaspar and Koneko cast me fearful looks. Even cross-dressers and petite girls understood my power.

Azazel put away his whiteboard marker as he concluded the strategy meeting. “I’d put your chances of winning this match at above eighty percent. I think you’ll win—but I can’t say it’s definite. The respective values of each of your units aren’t absolute, either. Like in actual chess, the relative importance of each piece depends on the situation on the board.”

We each focused intently on his words. They left a strong impression on us, enough to be engraved deep into our hearts.

“I’ve lived a long time and seen a lot of battles. During my time, I’ve seen people grasp victory despite impossible odds. Don’t underestimate anyone, even if they only have a one percent chance of beating you. Fight to win. That’s the last piece of advice I’ve got for you.”

Following Azazel’s lesson, we discussed tactics with the members left out of the conversation so far.

We were going to win this! Absolutely!



On the day of the decisive match, we assembled at a vast magic circle set up beneath the Gremory residence for the sole purpose of transporting us to the venue.

Each member of the Familia had taken their place on the circle, ready to make the jump to the battlefield.

Apart from Asia and Xenovia, we were all wearing our Kuou Academy summer uniforms. Asia was wearing her nun outfit, while Xenovia was dressed in the bondage-like combat uniform she had worn when we’d first met. Both of them looked to be in high spirits. The Sitri Familia was also clad in their Kuou Academy uniforms.

The prez’s father and mother, Millicas, and Azazel each stood outside the circle, offering words of encouragement.

“You’ve tasted defeat once before, Rias. Be sure to win this time.”

“You’re fighting as the next head of this family, Rias. Do us proud. The same

goes for everyone else, all right?”

“You can do it, Aunty Rias!”

“I’ve taught you everything I could. The rest is up to you all.”

Sirzechs and Grayfia weren’t here to see us off. They had already gone to a VIP lounge reserved for important spectators. From what I heard, high-ranking guests from groups other than the three great powers were in attendance. Azazel would be joining them after seeing us off.

This Rating Game sure seemed to be attracting a lot of attention. Perhaps that was to be expected of an unofficial battle between two up-and-coming young demons, both sisters of Demon Kings, no less.

Tension filled the air as the magic circle let out a burst of light.

The battle was finally underway!

On the other side of our jump through the magic circle was an area filled with tables.

Are we in some kind of spacious restaurant?

I glanced around before realizing that we seemed to be in the dining hall of a food court, surrounded by fast-food restaurants.

Was this also a replica of a location in the human world, in a purpose-built alternate dimension? The abilities and powers of the top-ranking demons were beyond incredible.

Huh? I know this place...

The arrangement of the outlet stores struck a chord in my memories. I stepped out to get a better look and glanced around. Yep. We were in a vast shopping plaza.

Familiar businesses lined the walls, and there was an atrium with a glass ceiling! Light was spilling in from above.

I know this place well!

“I wouldn’t have expected them to use the mall near Kuou Academy as the stage for the battle,” the prez remarked, striding up beside me.

Yep, this was the exact shopping plaza we all so often frequented!

At that moment, a broadcast sounded over the loudspeakers. *“Welcome, everyone. I, Grayfia, Queen of Sirzechs Lucifer’s Familia, will act as Arbiter for today’s Rating Game between the Houses of Gremory and Sitri.”*

Just like last time during our battle against Riser Phenex, Grayfia was our announcer. Hold on, wasn’t her introduction a little different from last time, though? I seemed to remember her describing herself as a servant of the House of Gremory, but this time, she clearly stated she was a member of Sirzechs’s Familia. Was that because this was a different kind of match?

“In the name of my master, Sirzechs Lucifer, I shall watch over the contest between these two Houses. Thank you, everyone, for your cooperation. Today’s battlefield is a replica of the department store near Lady Rias and Lady Sona’s school, Kuou Academy, prepared especially in an isolated plane.”

The fact that the battle would be held in a familiar setting might have made things comparably easier for us, but the same could be said for the Sitri Familia. Surely, they were all familiar with this place, too.

The shopping mall that had become our battlefield was a two-story building, but not an exceptionally high one.

That said, both floors were quite long, giving the structure a sizable horizontal footprint. There was also a parking lot on the roof and a multistory parking garage adjacent to it.

“Both teams have been transported to their respective bases. Lady Rias’s home base is located in the east wing on the second floor, while Lady Sona’s is in the west wing on the first floor. All Pawns, please proceed to the immediate vicinity of the opposing team’s home base to use a Promotion.”

The bases were on opposite sides of the shopping mall, ours upstairs to the east, theirs below to the west. Nearby, I saw a pet shop, an arcade, a food court, a bookstore, and a drugstore. Sona’s base was located by a large second-hand bookstore and a sporting goods store.

There was also a supermarket, an electronics store, another fast-food restaurant, and all the general household goods shops on the way to the enemy

territory.

When the battle started, each team was supposed to aim for the other end of the building. It was a simple enough path, but of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

“There are a number of special rules in effect during this match. These have been provided in written form to both teams. Please consult them before beginning. Each side has been granted a single vial of Phoenix Tears. The match will commence in thirty minutes. You may use your time until then to devise your strategies. Contact with the opposing team during this time is forbidden.”

After the announcement, we all quickly gathered around. There was no time to waste.

“So the battlefield is modeled on the shopping mall near Kuou Academy, which makes this an indoor battle,” the prez commented, looking over the map of the structure's layout and interior on a nearby wall. She pulled out a special diagram, dividing the field into an eight-by-eight grid shaped like a chessboard.

We established ourselves in the food court as we devised our strategy.

I hadn't known that a Rating Game could be an indoor fight! My assumption was that most battles took place on open fields, with bases on opposite sides, as we'd had during our match against Riser Phenex.

Instead, we were in the mall near our school! We often dropped by here on our way home after classes!

Probably more than 90 percent of students at Kuou were familiar with this place. The prez, Asia, and I swung by on our days off, too.

Rias looked over the document outlining the special rules before addressing us. “It says here that we mustn't destroy the department store that serves as the battlefield. In other words, we'll have to refrain from doing anything too flashy.” She narrowed her eyes, as if deep in thought.

“...I see. That puts the vice president, Issei, and me at a disadvantage. We can't use any attacks with wide areas of effect,” Xenovia remarked.

She was right about that. Seeing as this was an indoor skirmish and that we

couldn't risk damaging the structure too much, I wouldn't be able to use my Boosted Gear to charge my Dragon Shot! The fire magic I had picked up at great pain during my long training with Tannin would be useless, too! I could end up burning this place to the ground! For her part, Akeno wouldn't be able to wield her thunder magic unless she was on the rooftop, right? If she didn't hold back, this place would get blasted to bits!

Xenovia's reckless strikes with Durendal were a no go as well. Even at the best of times, that holy weapon was incredibly dangerous, so she wouldn't be able to wave it around carelessly.

"Well, this *is* a problem. Most of my large-scale attacks will be off-limits," Akeno said, raising a hand to her cheek.

Kiba let out a sigh, offering his own observation. "Gasper's eyes will be less effective here, too. There are a lot of places to hide, what with all the outlet stores. All the goods look like they've been reproduced, so there are many obstacles to hinder his vision. Our opponents may also try to ambush us in the dark. When you consider our individual characteristics, this is a truly disadvantageous location. Our Familia's forte is over-the-top combat. Toning it down limits our options."

What a mess. We may have been strong, but this rule completely upended everything!

The prez, however, shook her head. "Actually, we've been prohibited from using Gasper's eyes at all. That's another one of the supplementary rules listed here. 'The use of Gasper Vladi's Sacred Gear is prohibited.' The reason is clear enough, given that he can't fully control it yet. The organizers don't want his Sacred Gear running wild and ruining the match. We've also been banned from letting Issei offer his blood to him. Gasper must also use those Sacred Gear-limiting glasses that Azazel made. 'As they are for his exclusive use, they should have no adverse effect on his body,' it says here. Those preparations really have come in handy."

Yet another problem! Gasper's Sacred Gear was off-limits! Well, now that the prez mentioned it, I had heard that his training hadn't been going so well. He had made some fair progress, but controlling his eyes was still a way off. I

couldn't help but wonder whether releasing him outside had truly been a good idea.

"So he's only allowed to fight with magic and vampire powers?" I questioned.

The prez nodded. "That's right. In any event, freezing time would have been a considerable risk. Not only does the other team have a number of Counter-type fighters, but Saji's Sacred Gear also specializes in absorbing other people's abilities. There's no telling what it could've led to. On top of that, they could distract Gasper with illusions, and there are other ways to deprive him of his eyesight. We're better off not using his Sacred Gear during the fight. It's only natural to want to play it safe."

Vali had said something similar: that experienced opponents easily dealt with abilities activated via eyesight. Gasper had already put on the glasses.

The prez continued, saying, "...A Rating Game isn't something that can be won with brute force or the strength of one's powers. The situation on the board can change completely depending on the particular battlefield or rules. Rating Games are popular because demons who lack immense power can rise to victory with good judgment and tactics. The rules this time may be to our disadvantage, but if we can't cope, we won't win this match or any future ones. There's a saying in chess that is equally true here: 'Even a Pawn can take a King.' Anyone can win if they employ the proper strategy."

Akeno nodded in concurrence. "Indeed. We may well find ourselves faced with indoor battlefields in future official matches, too. When that time comes, like today, we won't be able to exercise our full strength. Which means this is a good opportunity for us, the perfect chance to get used to indoor team battles."

Faced with this intellectual discussion, I timidly raised my hand with a question. "U-uh, Prez... I spent all my training trying to increase my power to unlock my Balance Breaker, and I didn't really get a chance to practice holding back..."

"I know. We've been blindsided this time. The battlefield and rules may have been randomly selected, but still, do try to restrain yourself as much as possible. You could end up blowing away the whole shopping mall. I'm sorry about making it so difficult for you, but try to stick to hand-to-hand combat..."

“...R-right. I mean, I’m pretty worried about this, to be honest...”

Seriously? This setting put Power-type fighters like me at a real disadvantage. Still, if I was going to aim for the top and fight in more Rating Games in the future, I had to get used to these kinds of conditions.

...I felt like crying at the thought of the challenges that lay ahead. I had never imagined that my summer of training would end up proving completely pointless!

Come to think of it, Azazel had said something about situations like this. *“Your Balance Breaker will be an indispensable weapon. But just so you realize, there are no absolutes in the Rating Game. There are demons without a single Balance Breaker—wielding individual in their Familia who still manage to come out on top.”*

I hadn’t fully understood what he had meant back then, but I felt as if I did now.

On a battlefield with rules like this, Balance Breakers weren’t surefire trump cards! That knowledge was more than a bit discouraging.

“Once we go on the attack, the problem will be the shopping plaza’s atrium,” Rias explained, pausing to glance at the map. “It can be approached from both the top and bottom floors on either side of the mall.”

Akeno then chimed in, saying, “Another possibility would be to strike from the car park, but they will undoubtedly send someone to watch out from there.”

“Yes, the same applies to the rooftop. In any case, as we aren’t allowed to step outside the shopping mall, there are only three routes. We’ll have to choose to move through the building, cross the rooftop, or go into the car park,” the prez concluded.

“I wonder whether there are any cars around. The store shelves and merchandise were replicated, so vehicles might have been, too,” appended Akeno.

The prez’s discussion with her Queen left nothing out. This was yet another demonstration of what a Queen was supposed to do for their King.

Kiba raised his hand with a proposal. "President, I'll head up to the rooftop parking lot. There's a staircase nearby. I can scout things out."

The prez nodded. "Please, Yuuto."

With that, he hurried to the nearest exit.

"Are the cars important?" I asked doubtfully. I mean, why did it matter whether or not there were any vehicles?

"A car charging toward us would be trouble, don't you think? We also need to contemplate the possibility that they might use one as an explosive. Admittedly, I don't consider Sona the type to recklessly drive through a building, but we should acknowledge the prospect," the prez responded.

That made sense. Evidently, I still had a lot to learn. Everything lying around the battlefield could be used in the fight. A car could make a good weapon.

"You're really cautious, huh?" I observed.

"Of course. But I feel as if this still isn't enough. Someone could easily hide in a vehicle, for example. Now that I think about it, we haven't checked the staff room, either. We'll have to see to that... Issei, there are a lot of clothes stores here... Perhaps we could make use of your Dress Break technique? There's no end to the things we need to account for in a shopping mall like this." Rias was pondering every detail, no doubt reluctant to overlook anything.

She turned next to my cross-dressing underclassman. "Gasper, I want you to transform into a colony of bats and disperse throughout the mall. We'll need you to keep us informed of developments during the early stages of the match."

"R-right!"

Whoa, Gasper was seriously fired up! It was his first Rating Game, after all.

Our group continued to deliberate on tactics for the next few minutes, leaving no possibility up to chance.

By the time we were halfway through our pre-match discussion period, our strategy was more or less set in stone.

The prez glanced around at each of us. "The Rating Game will be starting in fifteen minutes. We'll meet back here in ten. Everyone, please relax until then."

With those instructions, we were dismissed, going our separate ways. I was the only one who Rias called back. “Issei, now that you’ve unlocked your Balance Breaker, the seal I placed on you to restrain your eight Pawn pieces has also been released.”

Yep, it was as she said. With all my recent progress, I had the power of all of my Pawn pieces at my disposal.

“Keep in mind, however, that while you may be able to access Ddraig’s strength completely, your body still can’t fully control it. I suspect he may also hold back some of your power to keep from injuring you. Be careful. The might of the Red Dragon Emperor, when wielded without caution, can end up destroying its host.”

“Gotcha! I’ll be careful, Prez!”

My full potential had been revealed. I hoped one day I would be able to handle it adequately. Since the beginning, I owed my value as a Pawn almost wholly to Ddraig.

The strength that flowed inside me was his.

My importance lay in being able to utilize that immense force! I would have to keep that in mind.

Having given her warning, the prez made her way to the food court and began to prepare a pot of tea. She was going to enjoy a nice, relaxing drink before the start of the battle. Gasper looked to have had a similar idea, eating donuts from a nearby fast-food place.

Asia and Xenovia were sitting and chatting by a hamburger shop. Kiba was perusing the drugstore by the food court. Ah, right. Seeing as everything in this building looked like a perfect copy of its real-life counterpart, he was probably searching for medicines or items that he could bring with him to use if necessary.

Everyone was trying to relax in their own ways. As for me...

I turned around and headed for the bookstore near the food court.

Heh-heh-heh.

Yep, it looked like I had been right! Just like everything else in here, the bookstore was a perfect carbon copy as well! I made my way immediately through the shop to the erotic books section.

Here they are! Awesome! An all-you-can-read porno paradise! Never did I dream that a battlefield like this could exist! Where should I start? Is this how a treasure hunter feels when they stumble on a massive hoard of gold? I can pick and choose whatever I like!

Then I wondered if it was possible to take these volumes home with me. I wanted nothing more! My two negative influencers at school and all the other guys had started saying that since the prez and the others had moved in with me, I had lost my interest in erotic books.

That wasn't true at all! I might have been living with the prez, but if I tried to make a move on her, she could end up hating me forever! On the other hand, I still had a healthy sexual appetite, just as any high schooler would, so if I didn't do something, I would end up spending my days in agony!

That was why I needed to vent my passions in a way I couldn't with the prez or the others.

Ah, if only I had a harem, then I wouldn't need these dirty books...

But until then, I would have to make do with these! It was hard to find a chance to look at these kinds of things in my room, what with the prez and Asia staying there, which left me only one choice—to read them now!

Whoa! What gorgeous breasts! That said, these pictures can't compare in beauty or size to the prez's or Akeno's!

Regardless, it was simply marvelous imagining the feel of their chests as I browsed my periodicals.

"Issei... What are you doing? Oh dear, you're reading a very naughty book there. I suppose we do have plenty of time before the battle."

Squeeze.

An extraordinarily soft sensation pressed up against my back! Breasts! I knew this feeling! And this lusty sing-song voice! Akeno!

She was hugging me from behind, looking over my shoulder at the book in my hands.

“A-Akeno! I-I’m not...! I was just trying to see how detailed all these copied objects are!”

It was a terrible excuse.

Nonetheless, Akeno didn’t get angry at me, merely flashing me a sweet smile. “Oh-ho. I don’t mind. And I don’t think less of you. In fact, I’m relieved to see you acting so much like your usual self.”

She was even more tolerant of my perverted behavior than the prez was.

Akeno’s expression turned studious as she glanced down at the open page. “...I see, so this is the kind of thing you like...”

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought she looked weirdly serious. Was she also interested in this kind of material?

“A-Akeno?” I inquired quietly, puzzled by her reaction.

In response, she pointed at the photo of the model in the book. “Shall I dress up like this for you next time, Issei?”

The outfit she was talking about was a sexy video game one! It practically left the wearer nude! Only a few tiny pieces of cloth covered her privates! There wasn’t even any underwear!

“S-seriously?!” I couldn’t help but ask. I mean, were miracles like this possible?

“Seriously. Oh-ho. You’re a very special person to me, Issei,” assured Akeno with a broad smile.

Awesome! She was willing to dress up for me! Seriously, I would have to put in a special request with her when we had the chance. Ah, so erotic cosplay truly did exist...

Suddenly, I couldn’t stop my mind from wandering!

This kind of outfit would be nice, but so would this one, and this one, too...

As the nonstop fantasies filled my mind, she tightened her embrace around

me. "A-Akeno...?"

"...You give me courage, Issei," she said in a vulnerable voice.

I was startled at the sudden admission.

Courage, huh? Come to think of it, the prez said something similar while holding my hand during the meeting between the three great powers.

"...I need it to fight... I'm scared of using the other power that flows inside me. I hate it. That's why I need you, Issei. For your courage."

Had she resolved to make use of those fallen angel abilities she so despised, those powers she wanted to be without?

Given the circumstances right now, she was in no position to deny her innate strengths. Refusing them would keep her from moving forward.

I had no way of fully understanding, but I could see this was a harrowing challenge for her.

"If that's true, I'm happy to give you all the courage you need!" I declared with a grin as I grasped her hand in my own.

If I was good enough to help her find the strength she needed, then I was honored.

"Will you be there, Issei, if I have to use my holy powers? If you're there watching, I might be able to bring myself to wield them."

"O-of course! If that's all you require, then I'll gladly do it!"

"...Thank you, Issei. I'm so happy... I know you belong to Rias...but won't you stay by my side...?" Akeno's voice trailed off there, too low for me to properly make out what she was saying.

She let go of my back, her eyes glistening. At that moment, she brought her face close.

"...Issei, it's time."

Just as Akeno's lips were about to press against mine, Koneko popped up out of nowhere!

Aughhhhh! Sh-sh-she saw us!

This was bad! Seriously bad! Just a millimeter nearer, and we would have been kissing!

But I mean, those lips! They were unbelievably attractive! Still, if the prez found out, she would kill me!

If Rias knew that I, her servant and pet, had been about to get intimate with someone else—she would utterly destroy me!

“K-Koneko! This isn’t...!” I stammered, but the person in question merely let out a sigh, her eyes half-closed.

“Oh dear, Koneko. You saw us. Oh-ho. Thank you, Issei. I feel much better now.” Back to her usual self, Akeno turned to leave. “...Next time... You and me...” She murmured something in passing as she departed. She looked almost regretful at having to go.

No, I must have been imagining things. I was sure of it. That girl had been trying to come after me in full-on sadist mode.

I nodded to myself with renewed certainty—when Koneko grabbed my hand.

“K-Koneko?” I was taken aback by her sudden gesture, but to my surprise, I saw that she was blushing.

“...Please give me courage, too.”

Right. She was also going to use a power that she had previously been repressing. Her hands were trembling.

Koneko must have been scared, terrified, that her *nekomata* abilities would consume her.

“Sure. If you’ll have me,” I responded, holding her hand with a grin.

I was happy to give Akeno and Koneko what they needed to overcome their fears.

“...Issei, aren’t you afraid of me because I’m a *nekomata*?” Koneko inquired uncertainly.

“Not at all,” I replied simply.

Why would I have been afraid of her? Heck, I actually thought her cat-eared

form was adorable and lovely. I knew about what had happened with her sister, but that was no reason to shy away from Koneko.

At this, Koneko seemed genuinely astonished. Nonetheless, she continued to stare down at the ground.

“...Before our training, I said something awful to you.”

She was referring to when I had addressed her without thinking, and she had gotten angry at me.

“Don’t worry about it. I was in the wrong there. I didn’t know your situation, and I—well, I wasn’t a very considerate upperclassman to you.”

“That isn’t true.” I felt Koneko’s grip around my hand tighten. “...I’m going to use my *nekomata* powers this time.”

The girl’s sudden declaration nearly made me gasp.

“...I don’t want to be like my sister. But at this rate, I won’t be able to help anyone. So I’ve decided to use them.” Determination burned in Koneko’s eyes.

Had she overcome her mental hurdles when she had told her sister that she wouldn’t have anything to do with her anymore?

“Koneko, I know you can do it. You’ll overcome your *nekomata* abilities, and then you can call yourself a hellcat.”

“...A hellcat?”

“Yep, like the name for the underworld plus *cat*! A hellcat!” I stated confidently, though even I knew it was an unorthodox way of trying to encourage her. “Don’t worry. If your *nekomata* powers somehow end up getting out of control, I’ll stop you! I want to use my Red Dragon Emperor powers not just for myself but also to look after my friends. And if your scary sister shows her face again, I’ll protect you. I’ll send her flying, so you don’t need to feel afraid.”

My words were wholly sincere. I wasn’t the brightest bulb in the pack, so that was the best I could come up with. But as contrived as those words might have been, I would put my life on the line to protect her.

“...You *are* a gentle Red Dragon Emperor...”

Koneko muttered something under her breath, but it didn't quite reach my ears. Something about being gentle, maybe?

Whoa. Koneko's cheeks are all red. What's wrong? Did I make a lecherous face again?



It was time.

We gathered in the center of the food court as we awaited the beginning of the match.

Then an announcement rang through the shopping mall: *"It's time. Please remember that this will be a three-hour blitz-style match. Now then, let the match begin."*

The Rating Game was underway!

Hold on, a blitz-style match?! So we only have a short time limit?! No one told me about that sort of rule! So that's why we were given thirty minutes to strategize!

I had to wonder if changing the rules so frequently was really okay, but I suppose that's what gave the Rating Game so much depth.

The prez stood up from her chair, her expression radiating determination. "Your instructions are as we discussed earlier. We will split into groups. Issei and Koneko will advance through the shopping mall. Yuuto and Xenovia will proceed through the parking lot. Gasper will morph into a colony of bats and provide us with status updates throughout the building. Once conditions allow, Akeno, Asia, and I will proceed along Issei and Koneko's route."

We were all equipped with communication earpieces.

"Now then, my cute servant demons! We aren't going to lose again! This time, victory will be ours!"

"Yeah!" we cried back in unison.

We weren't about to let ourselves get defeated all over again! We would win! No matter what!

"Ready, Xenovia? Let's go."

“Okay, Kiba.”

Kiba and Xenovia were the first to set out. They sped off down a path that led to the multistory car park. According to Kiba, it was populated with vehicles, albeit imitation ones. They were apparently undrivable.

Now that they had gone, it was our turn.

“Koneko, we’re up.”

“Right.”

She and I began to make our way through the shopping center. Koneko had already declared to everyone that she was ready to use her *nekomata* powers.

The prez believed the opposing team was anticipating that I’d burst into their base while fighting as little as possible to promote to a Queen. To our opponents, Kiba and Xenovia moving through the garage would look like a distraction to lessen resistance on my end. Once I had promoted to Queen, our opponents likely thought we’d fall back and launch a joint assault where the prez would join the fray.

According to Rias, that was what the chairwoman was expecting. Thus, our actual strategy was the opposite.

I would proceed according to the chairwoman’s expectations and launch an attack. However, our real offensive strategy involved Kiba and Xenovia. They weren’t the diversion; I was.

The brunt of the opposing forces would come for me, leaving the enemy King only lightly defending. Some people would be sent after Kiba and Xenovia, too, but the chairwoman’s best fighters would be dispatched to take me out. Kiba and Xenovia should be able to handle whatever they encountered without much issue.

Then we would go after their King, and checkmate!

I was to use my Red Dragon Emperor abilities in a different way than usual. This time, my role wasn’t to wield brute strength, but to combine my powers with the others.

“Good luck, Issei.”

“Issei! You can do it! Don’t lose!”

“Oh-ho, I’m looking forward to seeing you pull off something cool.”

The prez, Asia, and Akeno were all cheering me on! Whoa! I would have to put up a good show! Hold on, they weren’t going with me, though, so wouldn’t they have to watch me on the recording later...?

Koneko and I advanced at a controlled pace, neither walking nor running.

Given how easily our movements echoed through the building, enemies could easily find us if we weren’t careful. Moreover, as the mall proceeded in a single long, straight line, there were few options to conceal ourselves as we advanced.

It might have been on the large side for a shopping center, but crossing it wasn’t going to take more than ten minutes with no other people around. Koneko and I proceeded with the utmost caution.

Once we reached a certain point, we ducked behind a row of vending machines and surveyed the area ahead.

...*Hmm*. As far as I could see, no one was waiting for us. It had already been five minutes since the beginning of the match, but because we were moving so cautiously, we had only moved a quarter of the way through the building.

It would have looked like we were doing our best to avoid combat to any outside observer, but in actuality, we were the bait. Talk about nerve-racking.

At that moment—two cat ears popped up on Koneko’s head!

They twitched so cutely! She had even grown a tail! Her sheer loveliness could have killed me! What was going on? Why was I so excited?! I might not have had a thing for petite figures, but perhaps I was discovering a fetish for beast girls! Koneko’s *nekomata* mode was melting my heart!

She pointed into the distance. “...They’re moving. Two people, directly ahead of us.”

“You can tell?”

“...Yes. I’ve activated part of my sage magic so that I can read the flow of their *qi* a little. I still can’t make out the details, though...”

So did those cat ears of hers work like sensors, then? That sounded incredibly useful.

This sage magic allowed Koneko to detect things nearby! *Nekomata* were supposed to be able to perceive what was happening around them through smell, too, right? Koneko was a cat, after all, so her nose had to be better than a human-type demon like me.

“How long until they reach us?” I inquired.

“Around ten minutes.”

Ten minutes...

We would have to be ready. I found myself wavering between using my Sacred Gear regularly or invoking my Balance Breaker. The real issue was that I didn’t know who we were going up against.

My strength lay in my physical force. My demon abilities were all but nonexistent. Even if I boosted them with my Sacred Gear, I would quickly run out of gas... No matter how strong my power, I wouldn’t stand a chance if I used it all up recklessly!

I was always in danger. I would have to keep that in mind at all times.

Koneko was staring at me intently. It could have been my imagination, but I thought I saw her cheeks flush.

“Wh-what?”

“...Nothing. You looked like a brave warrior just now. You’re usually so lewd, though...”

Seriously? Do I normally wear a lecherous expression? W-well, it is true that I indulge in erotic fantasies often...

I lifted my hand to my cheek.

“—!”

All of a sudden, Koneko glanced up at the ceiling. “Above us!”

What was going on? I followed her gaze and saw that a long rope was dangling from the ceiling.

No, it's a line!

And using it to swing across the mall like Tarzan of the Apes was...

“Hyoudou! The first blow is mine!”

Saji! He came flying toward me, ready to deliver a kick! And there was someone else holding on to his back!

I lifted my gauntlet into the air to shield myself!

Thud!

The impact of Saji's descent coursed through my arm!

The force of the blow made me lose my combat posture for a brief moment, but I quickly corrected myself and prepared for my opponent's next move.

“Yo, Hyoudou,” Saji called. Next to him was the person who had been hanging on to his back—a girl. She must have been a member of the student council. If I remembered correctly, she was also a first-year student. Hanging on to Saji's back must have been pretty difficult.

A bunch of black snakes wholly entwined Saji's right arm. His Sacred Gear looked completely different from what I remembered! Last time, it had resembled a deformed lizard head. Had his Sacred Gear changed?!

What?!

Before I knew it, there was a black snake wound around my Sacred Gear, too, linking to his. He must have attached the line during his attack!

There was another serpent on my other arm, but that one didn't link to Saji's Sacred Gear. Rather, it seemed to lead somewhere far into the distance. Did it go all the way to the enemy base, perhaps?

As strange as it felt, those tethers didn't seem to be absorbing my powers.

Saji saw me glancing at his Sacred Gear and flashed me an amused grin. “Well, I've been training, too. This is the result. After I attached a line to the ceiling to get the lay of the mall, I happened to spot you two off in the distance. Neither of you seemed to notice me, so I took my chance to swing in.”

So that was how he had found us. Yep, I could understand that.

Had I located him first, I would've tried a surprise attack, too.

We were similar, Saji and I, in so many ways. We were both perverted lechers, dedicated to our masters, single-minded and foolish, plunging headfirst into whatever we set our sights on.

It was because of our commonalities that I'd known we'd face each other today.

"You aren't the only one who's been training. I spent more than half the summer getting chased around by a dragon!" I declared.

Sorry, Saji. I'm going to have to eliminate you and push forward. Because nothing is more important to us today than winning.

I had to catch up to Vali. He was going to come after me one of these days. When that happened, there was no telling whether he would try to hurt the prez or Asia or any of the others.

I had to get stronger to stop that from happening! Failure here wasn't an option.

Yes, I was ready and willing to fight.

Unfortunately, it was at that moment that an unbelievable announcement echoed through the mall.

"One of Rias Gremory's Bishops has retired."

What?! Who?!

The game had just started! Asia was with the prez, which left—

Saji flashed me a grin. "I'm guessing it was Gasper."

Gasper? What on earth happened? I wondered. This was too fast! Wasn't he supposed to have transformed into a colony of bats to monitor the goings-on inside the shopping center?

"Looks like we got him," Saji remarked. "We've all been told that his Sacred Gear was sealed according to the supplementary rules. Which meant he would inevitably have to use his vampire powers instead, right? We assumed he would turn into a bunch of bats and scout around the building. So the chairwoman had

an idea: to use our home base itself against him.”

Their home base? The grocery store at the end of the mall?

“First, one of our Familia members started acting all suspicious. That had to get his attention, right? So more of those bats gathered to check out the situation. And when they were all together, he was ours. If something happened to those bats when they were all together, Gasper would revert into his true form. And we made sure he transformed back somewhere very specific—right near one of a vampire’s biggest weaknesses, a display stand filled with garlic. Our base is the grocery store on the west side of the mall. There was already plenty of the stuff lying around, so it wasn’t that hard.”

So they had taken him out while the stench of garlic had incapacitated him! Impossible! I hadn’t even considered that possibility!

“Simple, right? But I’m guessing that strategy won’t ever work on him again. The chairwoman had guessed that no matter how much training he did, he wouldn’t be able to get over his weakness to garlic. It was a stroke of luck that we had so much at our home base, but a defeat is still a defeat.”

So Saji’s saying they exploited that vulnerability? No, no matter how effective that strategy, Gasper should still be able to put up with a bit of garlic! Gasperrrrr! This isn’t funny! We are so going to train you to overcome your fear of garlic once this is over! I’ll replace all your regular food with garlic rice and garlic toast! You can’t drop out of the fight without so much as conducting surveillance properly!

I was upset now and began to activate my Sacred Gear, when—

“Partner, you had better not double your power here. Now that you’re connected to that guy, he’ll drain any excess energy you charge.”

Ddraig was right. Saji’s Sacred Gear could sap the power of whatever it was connected to. Right now, it was tethered to my Sacred Gear, so powering up was too big of a risk!

“The only way to sever that line will be to blow it away with the aftershock from activating your Balance Breaker.”

I’d wanted to avoid using my trump card, but now I had no choice but to

activate it right away!

“Start!”

“Countdown!”

The time until my Balance Breaker was ready appeared on the jewel on the back of the gauntlet. Now that the transformation had started, I couldn't use my regular Sacred Gear abilities!

There was nothing left to do but dodge Saji's attacks for a full two minutes!

This was a short, blitz-style game. Kiba and Xenovia were the ones going for the enemy King, so once my armor formed, I needed to cause the biggest ruckus I could to distract everyone!

I began to move back to distance myself but was pulled back by the line, losing my balance! AUGH, Saji's Sacred Gear was a real pain!

“I'm not letting you get away, Hyoudou!”

He leaped forward and delivered a powerful kick to the gut!

Thud!

I doubled over at the force of that blow! Still, I was able to avoid the worst of it by tensing my abdomen. Heh-heh-heh, my basic training had paid off. I was confident in my physical condition!

“Heh, I thought I'd hit you pretty hard there. Looks like you really put yourself through your paces, huh?” Having failed to inflict as much damage as he had intended, Saji flashed me a wry grin.

It looked like escape was out of the question! I would have to attack head-on!

With nowhere else to run, I charged straight for Saji! I wasn't particularly skilled at hand-to-hand fighting, but I *had* done a lot of physical exercise! My blows had force behind them. I just needed to trust my body!

I clenched my fist and lashed out at Saji, but he fired another line from his right arm! Was he trying to suck my power away?! I readied myself, but instead of striking me, the snake flew right past me to a light in a nearby shop.

“Nimura! Put on those sunglasses we took from the store just before!”

Saji and his junior both pulled a pair of shades from their pockets, donning them!

It only took me a moment to figure out what they were up to.

Gah!

Everything erupted in a brilliant, luminous blaze, blinding Koneko and me!

Dammit!

“Looks like they got you. He connected that line to the lighting equipment and sent it into overdrive by pouring a little energy into it.”

Don’t act so calm, Ddraig! This is bad! I can’t even open my—

Thud!

“Gah!”

Another blow to the gut! This time, I hadn’t had a chance to tense my muscles, and so I took the full force of the attack! Then, while I was hunched over, Saji delivered another strike to my back!

Ow! That huuuuurt! As the pain welled up inside me—

Slam!

Saji brought a debilitating uppercut to my jaw. The series of strikes brought me to the floor.

...Gah... He got me. Saji had certainly claimed the upper hand early, and I’d suffered for it.

The impact of that blow to my chin had left my teeth rattling. I must have cut the inside of my mouth, as I could taste blood. My eyesight returned. Lying facedown on the ground, I looked up.

Saji was dashing straight toward me with his fist about to unleash a mass of demonic energy! He was preparing to deliver the final blow! I quickly pulled myself up and rolled to the side.

Boom!

The blast left a huge crater in the floor! What force! That was definitely a

finishing move! Talk about dangerous! I had almost left the stage before even summoning my Balance Breaker. Had I been knocked out there, I would've been unable to scold Gasper for his lackluster performance.

“...Not bad, Saji.”

“I’m serious, Hyoudou. I’m going to take you down, Red Dragon Emperor.” His eyes were filled with determination. I could literally see his passion.

Saji raised his arm into the air, preparing to fire another attack.

Boom!

Another sphere of demonic power sped forth! That said, it wasn’t particularly large. Saji was probably taking pains not to damage the building.

Still, that strike had been more than enough to defeat an opponent like me!

I dodged the blast, and the shop behind me exploded in a burst of energy.

I’d thought Saji’s magic was as awful as mine. Where was he pulling that strength from?

At that moment, my eyes opened wide in realization. His Sacred Gear was connected to his chest—to his heart—by another one of his tethers.

“Saji! You’re using your own life to fuel your attacks?!”

“That’s right. I’ve never had much demonic power. This is the only way I can throw around big strikes. As you can see, I’m using my Sacred Gear to convert my life force into raw power. I’m *putting my life on the line*, I guess you could say.”

“Are you trying to kill yourself...?!”

Saji gave me an intense look. “Yeah, that’s it exactly. I intend to beat you, even if it costs me everything. Do you realize how humiliating it is having people mock your dreams? The chairwoman and I would do anything to prove them wrong. This match is being broadcast throughout the underworld. We have to show those jerks who laughed us down what the Sitri Familia is made of!”

Something from my past suddenly flashed before my eyes.

Yes, Saji now was just like I had been when I barged straight into the prez’s

engagement party.

I hadn't paid any heed to my own life, simply pouring all my effort into saving my master. I would have kept going; I would have tried to rescue her even if I had died in the process.

Saji, you're just like I was back then.

We continued to engage in a fierce contest of blows and dodges while Koneko and Saji's junior did the same.

Koneko excelled in hand-to-hand combat, but her opponent was fighting well, and the contest between them quickly grew heated.

However, the moment Koneko's fist grazed her opponent's cheek, the battle shifted. From where I was standing, it looked like Saji's junior was glancing around in worry. Was she taking damage from the shock waves caused by Koneko's punches?

Koneko didn't miss a beat. A pale-white aura enveloped her fist as she slammed it into her opponent's chest!

Thwam!

A sharp, merciless sound echoed through the building, and Saji's junior collapsed to her knees.

"...I focused my *qi* into my hand when I punched you. It's damaged the veins running through your body, which means you won't be able to control your demonic power... It should also keep you from moving," stated Koneko.

It reminded me of something Azazel had said to us. *"Koneko's natural fighting style involves a mixture of sage magic and hand-to-hand combat. Her attacks are designed to wound her opponents and disrupt the life force circulating throughout them. Yet if she lets herself be consumed by those abilities, she must stop immediately. Sage magic can be employed to read and manipulate qi, but it also makes one susceptible to the evil and malice that fills the world. Her sister became what she is because she took too much of that evil into herself."*

That was the secret to Koneko's strikes—attacks using *qi*. Each hit wounded you while weakening your body! The *qi* in Koneko's fists passed into her

opponents and incapacitated them!



Even if the punch itself wasn't powerful, so long as that concentration of *qi* could reach its mark, the effect was huge!

Or at least, that was what I had read in a book somewhere. I didn't have any particular specialist knowledge on human anatomy!

Who knew Koneko had been hiding such an impressive skill? If she used it well, she could end up being the most effective fighter in our Familia.

"...I'm sorry, Saji," the first-year girl managed before her body was enveloped in light, disappearing from the battlefield.

Koneko had injured her enough that she was being removed from the fight.

"One of Sona Sitri's Pawns has retired," sounded the announcement.

Now both teams were down one piece.

"...I'm going to be a hellcat. I won't lose!"

Now that my cute little underclassman was acting so cool, I had to put on a good show as well!

Sadly, I was struggling to avoid the balls of energy that Saji kept hurling my way. With so much power packed into them, all it would take would be for one of them to merely graze me, and I'd be done for. He was literally pouring his soul into them!

"Hah... Hah..."

Saji's incredible strength was not without a price, though. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to keep it up!

"...Issei, I'll help," Koneko stated as she began to approach us.

"No, Koneko. This is between Saji and me."

Koneko shook her head. "This is a team battle. We need to work together."

"Yeah, you're right about that. But, Koneko, Saji hasn't made any direct moves against you while he's been fighting me. If he had wanted to, he could have attached one of his lines to you and used it to absorb your powers. Why do you think he hasn't?"

Koneko stood in silence, unable to answer my inquiry. Saji gave her a weak smile.

“...Sorry, Koneko Toujou. I want to fight Hyoudou one-on-one and beat the Red Dragon Emperor myself. I told you all, right? We’re serious about our dream. We’re going to build a school—one here in the underworld, free of discrimination. And I’m going to be a teacher... That’s my goal... Everyone in the underworld is watching us. That’s why it’s so important that I, a Pawn, defeat my fellow Pawn Issei Hyoudou, the Red Dragon Emperor! I’ll do it! I’m letting it be known here and now! I’m going to be a teacher!”

Saji’s expression brooked no argument.

Turning to Koneko, I said, “That’s how it is. If I try to run away from this challenge, it will make me look bad, right? Saji’s my friend, so I’ve got no choice but to take him on in earnest. I have to! Otherwise, I’ll never be able to show my face to the prez again!”

Yes, Saji and I were very much alike. We were both straightforward fools.

Having heard us out, Koneko lowered her fist and stepped back.

“Thank you,” Saji and I said to Koneko in unison.

Hmm, why did Saji attach one of his lines to my right arm as well as my Sacred Gear? I wondered.

“He wants to keep you from activating your Sacred Gear’s doubling ability. He knows that if he absorbs both your powers and the Boosted Gear’s energy at the same time, his body won’t be able to cope with it all. That boy is trying to drain your power now to stop your Balance Breaker countdown and force you back to your normal form.”

What a complicated Sacred Gear!

“This is going nowhere...” Saji let out a sigh and summoned up an enormous energy sphere in his hands. That thing was huge enough to blow away everything around us!

At least, that’s what I thought initially. Suddenly, it compressed into a miniaturized size, a mass of demonic power about as big as a softball.

“This should be enough to destroy you completely while leaving your surroundings undamaged.” Saji was breathing heavily, his shoulders shaking. He had poured all his being into this attack.

Yep, he meant to finish me off.

He let out a chuckle. “I was so jealous of you, you know? You’re the pride of your master—the Red Dragon Emperor. Everyone knows about you. We’re both pawns, but what do I have? Nothing! So I’m going to earn my place; I’m going to win my master’s pride and confidence by crushing you!” Saji roared.

I’d had no idea he saw me that way. Regardless, I wasn’t going to be defeated. I had my own dreams, and the prez had hers! Seeing them through meant pushing ourselves to the limit!

Whoosh!

Saji fired the blast at me with all his strength.

I hastened to avoid it, but Saji released the line he had attached to my Boosted Gear and launched it toward my feet!

Thanks to that, my Boosted Gear was now tied to the ground by that tether! I tried to pull at it, but it was so taut that I couldn’t free myself!

This was bad! At this rate, I wouldn’t be able to avoid the oncoming attack! My Balance Breaker was seconds away from being ready, but it still wasn’t quick enough!

I had no choice but to brace myself! The projectile was coming my way!

Booooooooooom!

The moment it collided with me, the mass of demonic energy split open, its aura enveloping my surroundings!

At that instant...

“Divide!”

A white gauntlet enveloped my right arm, catching the attack.

...Only half of what I’d been expecting hit me. I had saved myself using the ability I had taken from the White Dragon Emperor. Still, I couldn’t take much

more. If Saji hit me again, I was done for!

“You divided my attack?!” Saji exclaimed in shock.

“I worked out how to activate this power during my training in the mountains. It has a bunch of conditions, though. First, the chance of it actually working is less than ten percent. It’s a real gamble. Second, this one eats into *my* life force. Regardless of whether or not it successfully triggers, just trying to use it shaves away my life span. Talk about a scary bet, huh?”

The risk had paid off, but my time in this realm had grown shorter. Having done what it was supposed to do, the white gauntlet quickly dissipated. I could still use it, but I couldn’t maintain its form for long.

Still, a success was a success. And the Boosted Gear’s countdown was complete!

“I’m also risking it all. I can’t afford to let anyone stop me, not now. Let’s do this! Sajiiii! Activate! Boosted Geaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

“*Welsh Dragon: Balance Breaker!*” the Sacred Gear’s voice rang out in response to my cry.

An oversized, dazzling red aura enveloped me, coalescing into a suit of armor.

At the same moment, a wave of energy swept through me.

Almost ten minutes had passed since the match had gotten underway.

I had equipped the Boosted Gear’s Scale Mail.

Waltz

Our Rating Game had begun only a short while ago. I—Yuuto Kiba—along with Xenovia, had just entered the multistory car park.

We proceeded with caution through the dimly lit garage. Perhaps we both had our long experience at these kinds of secret reconnaissance missions to thank for it, but we were making good progress.

I took the lead, confirmed that there wasn’t anyone lying in wait for us in the shadows ahead, and then called for Xenovia to approach from the rear. We repeated this pattern several times over as we gradually made our way through

the building.

The plan was to go down the ramp connecting the second-floor parking lot to the first-floor one. The elevators were fully functional, but we didn't want to risk getting caught in an ambush.

Thus, we had no choice but to take the safest, most reliable path.

After making it down the ramp to the first floor, I spotted a silhouette directly ahead.

Looking closely, I could see that it was a familiar figure, a glasses-clad woman with long black hair.

I knew that face. That was Tsubaki Shinra, Sona Sitri's Queen and the student council vice-chairwoman. She was clutching a halberd in her hands.

Right, I had heard that polearms were her weapons of choice. She was supposedly highly skilled with them.

"Greetings, Yuuto Kiba, Xenovia. I knew I would find you here," she stated coolly.

Two others appeared, one flanking Shinra from either side—a tall woman and a slender young lady wielding a katana.

The taller of the pair was called Yura, a Rook. The sword-wielding girl's name was Meguri, a Knight.

Yura was known to be particularly skilled in martial arts, while Meguri belonged to a family who made a living exterminating evil spirits.

So Chairwoman Sona saw fit to dispatch three pieces to the parking garage.

She had read us well. They were firmly in control of the area... Sona must have anticipated that Xenovia and I were the ones most likely to attack.

Xenovia unsheathed the blade she was carrying on her back while I summoned up a Holy Demon Sword.

Xenovia wasn't wielding her Durendal. Given the rule against damaging the arena, and the fact that she couldn't properly control the Durendal's destructive might, she had decided against using it.

“One of Rias Gremory’s Bishops has retired.”

An announcement informed us that one of our allies was gone. It was difficult to imagine Asia being eliminated so soon. I didn’t know how they had done it, but they must have defeated Gasper.

“You’re surprisingly calm,” Shinra remarked.

“Yes. I wouldn’t be of much use in a fight if I couldn’t handle casualties,” I replied with composure.

Internally, I was seething with frustration over knowing that a friend was hurt, however.

Gasper. They probably got you before you even had a chance to put on much of a show. My sword will fight twice as hard for you.

“Geez, he needs to put more effort into training himself up.” Xenovia sighed beside me. She was keeping calm as well, but her eyes betrayed her anger. “Still, you’ve gone and taken out my cute little junior. I’m going to have to avenge him.”

Her body was emanating a tremendous sense of pressure. Even I felt my skin tingling. Xenovia had a surprising soft spot toward her friends. No matter how he behaved, she was fond of Gasper. She wouldn’t accept the news of his defeat lying down.

We flashed each other determined grins, readied our weapons, and lunged!

Scrrrrrrrrrrrch!

Shinra and I crossed swords, as did Xenovia and Meguri. Sparks went flying at the force of the impact. The ear-rending sound of metal pushing against metal rang out.

It was at that moment that Meguri realized what Xenovia was wielding and took a hurried step back. “...A Holy Sword?!” she exclaimed.

Indeed, Xenovia was armed with a legendary Holy Sword.

“Yeah, this is the Ascalon. I’m borrowing it from Issei.”

“—?!” All three of our opponents stiffened at this revelation.

Our instructor, Azazel, had examined how it had merged with the Boosted Gear.

“Issei, can you unequip it?” he’d asked.

And so we had learned that the Holy Sword could indeed be removed from Issei’s Sacred Gear. With that knowledge, Azazel had hurried to implement a training schedule so that Xenovia could adapt to using the Ascalon.

She had spent a good part of her summer familiarizing herself with the weapon, from what I gathered. As the Ascalon now possessed both dragon-slaying abilities and the Red Dragon Emperor’s inherent powers, it had evolved into a potent armament.

It might not have been a match for the Durendal’s destructive force, but when one considered how much easier it was to use, it was clear that it could be employed in a much broader range of circumstances.

Of course, that meant Issei had been left without it. All we could do was hope the decision wouldn’t backfire on us...

Xenovia and I fell into a fierce battle against our three adversaries.

We were handling Shinra and Meguri well enough, but it was Yura, the Rook, who worried me.

It was anyone’s guess whether she’d go after Xenovia or myself first.

On guard against her, I continued to lash out with my Holy Demon Sword at the vice-chairwoman! My blade, along with Xenovia’s, reverberated with divine energy. If we managed to land a strike on our opponents, the damage would be considerable. Given that healing techniques were restricted, such a blow would probably be enough to retire them.

A single hit meant victory!

Xenovia, rapidly switching between offense and defense, suddenly opened a rift in the air. Normally, this was how she summoned the Durendal, but not this time.

A holy aura wafted out from that rift in the air, enveloping the Ascalon.

Shinra gawked in realization. “You’re absorbing the Durendal’s holy aura

without retrieving it?!”

Xenovia replied with a smirk. “Yeah, I’ve found an interesting use for it. I managed to make it work during my training. I’m more than capable of pulling it off now.”

The president and Azazel regarded the Durendal as a valuable asset but thought it was a waste of potential that Xenovia couldn’t freely wield it.

The Durendal was an incredibly mighty Holy Sword. If handled poorly, it would cause random destruction. Xenovia may have been able to control it to some extent, but it was probably more accurate to say she was at the weapon’s mercy.

One day, she might learn to master the Durendal, but it was too perilous to use recklessly until then. Thus, Azazel had come up with an idea.

“Can you draw only the Durendal’s aura from the dimension where you keep it? If so, you could try absorbing its strength with the Ascalon or one of Kiba’s Holy Demon Swords.”

I had been flabbergasted by this suggestion.

The Durendal didn’t need to leave its extra dimension to exude its incredible holy power, but if that aura could be drawn out, it could be channeled into another object for use.

The resulting effect wasn’t as impressive as the Durendal itself, but it was undoubtedly one of infinite potential. Xenovia was wielding that power now through the Ascalon.

Azazel, governor of the Fallen Angels and a former nemesis, had presented us with this option. I was beyond ecstatic that he had joined our side.

Xenovia slashed at her opponent with the Ascalon, fully clad in the Durendal’s energy!

Sheennnnnnnnnnnnnn! Screeeeeeeeeeech!

Silver sparks erupted in the parking lot. The Knight, Meguri, possessed considerable skill, but Xenovia was gradually winning out!

“Take this!”

Xenovia wasn't one to let an opening slip by, quickly cornering her opponent! She had her!

However, that was when another figure stepped into the fray, the Rook, Yura!

She raised both her hands in front of her, and—

“Reverse!”

Xenovia let loose with her attack, but the holy aura inverted into a demonic one!

Yura deftly stopped the Ascalon between her bare hands and sent it flying away. The Rook began to move into a follow-through, but Xenovia swiftly regained her composure and avoided the kick.

Swoooooooooosh!

The force of Yura's leg sent several vehicles flying through the garage. A direct hit from that would be incredibly dangerous.

I was left speechless by the phenomenon I had just witnessed. Somehow, a holy aura had become a demonic one!

Yura had called out the word *reverse*. So had she somehow altered the energy? Was that a special ability of hers? Her Sacred Gear? Whatever the reason, it was sure to pose a problem.

That must have been one of those so-called counter abilities. It was an unusual case, but if Yura used it in conjunction with Meguri, Xenovia and I would be in trouble.

Ascalon's holy power had been reversed, becoming demonic. As demonic power was what fueled demons, Xenovia's weapon would only inflict normal damage on one of us. Simply put, the Holy Sword had effectively been reduced to an ordinary blade.

Xenovia may have possessed a masterful skillset, but she was used to fighting with Holy Swords, and this development had no doubt put her on the back foot. Another counter like that could spell her defeat.

Well played, Sitri Familia. If that's how it's going to be...

“Xenovia! Let’s change places!” I called out, and the two of us quickly switched opponents.

This was better. Against my Holy Demon Sword, which used both divine and demonic power, a swapping ability would be useless.

As expected, Yura showed no signs of using that technique against me. Instead, she and Meguri launched a joint attack.

A short distance away, Xenovia and Shinra had begun to clash. Xenovia’s onslaught was so fierce that she drove Shinra up against the wall!

She had her!

Xenovia, finish it!

As if reading my mind, Xenovia raised the Ascalon and moved in for the winning blow! She could do this! If we took down the opposing team’s Queen, we would be in a much better tactical position!

“This match is ours!” she declared as she brought her weapon to bear on the other girl. From my point of view, it looked like a direct hit, but...

“Sacred Gear: Mirror Alice!”

A huge ornate mirror appeared out of nowhere, shielding Shinra!

Nonetheless, Xenovia followed through with her strike, carving straight through the thing.

Screeeeech!

“—?!”

With an ear-rending noise, the broken-looking glass sent a powerful wave of force back at Xenovia! Flustered and confused, she spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground.

“When this mirror is destroyed, it reflects the power of a strike back twofold. Yes, I’m a Counter-type fighter. Yuuto Kiba, it was a mistake to pit Xenovia, a Power-type, against me,” Shinra said with a sneer.

“Gah!” Falling to the ground in pain, Xenovia continued to hack up red liquid.

We had fallen right into their trap! I hadn’t heard anything about this ability

of Shinra's. Perhaps she'd only developed it recently.

"Now, all that remains is to deal with you, Yuuto Kiba."

The three women began to approach. I raced to grab Xenovia and hurried to conceal ourselves in the nearby shadows.

I laid her down behind a car and rummaged through the first-aid items I had taken from the drugstore earlier.

Our enemies had played us like a fiddle. I'd never expected to go against two Counter-type combatants. From the looks of it, Chairwoman Sona was aiming to eliminate us first. She must have correctly predicted that Xenovia and I formed the offensive group of our team's strategy.

Undoubtedly, we were a considerable threat to the opposition with our Holy Swords and above-average speed. The chairwoman had compensated for that by sending in three of her pieces, each capable of balancing out the weaknesses of the other two.

Has she foreseen our every move?

Xenovia's condition was serious. She had fallen victim to twice the power of the Durendal and the Ascalon combined.

If Shinra's Sacred Gear could send back holy attacks so easily, she could instantly retire either of us. In the worst of cases, the result could even be lethal.

Given her injuries, it wouldn't be long before Xenovia was forced to leave the battlefield. The next attack she took would undoubtedly be her last one.

Our stock of Phoenix Tears was with the president. I had no restoration skills at my disposal.

Xenovia grabbed my hand. "...Leave me, Kiba. I'm going to be retired any minute now."

However, I merely continued to treat her wounds. "I know. But I swore not to abandon my friends so easily."

"...How sentimental. You almost sound like Issei," she responded with a smile.

“Thanks. I do wish I could be more like him in some ways.”

Yes, I wished my spirit was as strong as his. He was incredible, the kind of person who never gave up.

Issei fully understood how weak he was, but still, he was always ready to stand against anyone. He always spoke deprecatingly of himself, yet in truth, he was more introspective than any of us.

In terms of raw strength, I was probably no longer a match for him. The amount of effort and perseverance he had poured into improving was remarkable. His continuous strides to better himself were worthy of admiration.

“You want to be like Issei? Like a pervert?”

“That can stay Issei’s thing... I do wish I had his sense of determination, though.”

Xenovia let out a weak giggle. “...That wouldn’t suit you.”

I had to agree. “I know, right? But so long as I can move even just a single finger, I won’t let anyone take me down!”

“I see. Are you telling me to keep on fighting until I’m completely spent? You’re awful.”

“If I’m going to fall, I want to keep moving as much as possible until it happens! Even if it’s only one more centimeter, one more millimeter! Anything less would leave me with regret!”

“One of Sona Sitri’s Pawns has retired.”

An announcement. It sounded like someone had taken out a member of the other team. Xenovia and I had to keep going, too.

The sound of our opponents’ footsteps approached.

Xenovia. It won’t be long before you retire. But before you go, there’s something I want to show you.

I stood up to meet my three enemies.

“Are you prepared?” Shinra asked as she approached, readying her halberd.

A small rift opened up in the air behind me—Xenovia’s handiwork. It was

perfectly situated, out of sight to each of my opponents. The next thing I knew, the Durendal's aura flowed into me.

Now, Xenovia. Let's show them what you and I, Rias Gremory's two Knights, have created!

Wh-wh-whoosh!

A barrage of Holy Demon Swords burst into being throughout the parking lot. Individually, their auras might not have been particularly potent, but with the Durendal's power mixed in, they were a force to be reckoned with.

"Durendal Birth!"

The attack instantly skewered Yura and Meguri, who were engulfed at once in light before disappearing.

Two down.

Shinra appeared to have somehow escaped and had vanished from the parking garage.

As I held her in my arms, Xenovia's body began to glow.

"Kiba. That was a good move." A satisfied smile rose to her lips as she departed the arena.

I saw her off with a smile. "Yep, if we team up again, we should be able to make more Holy Swords bloom."

There was a moment where Xenovia was weightless, and the next instant, she vanished from my grip.

Cr-cr-cr-cr-crackle!

With that fleeting sound, the Holy Swords that had sprung up all throughout the parking lot crumbled away.

Life.5

Prez vs. Chairwoman, Part 2!

Saji and I were still exchanging blows. No matter how you looked at it, I clearly had the advantage. My opponent was barely keeping it together. He had bundled his snake tethers together to act as a shield, but he wasn't able to block every one of my strikes.

I struck Saji so hard that I sent him crashing into the store behind him. We were close to evenly matched in terms of physical prowess. That said, my offensive and defensive skills had undergone a huge improvement lately. I still hadn't reached my full potential, but at this rate...

I knocked Saji down time and time again. His legs were quivering, but that didn't stop him from getting back up.

He kept throwing punches at my armor. His fists were long since broken, making a sickening crack with each impact as blood spurted.

Though he tried to attach another one of his lines to me, the Red Dragon Emperor's aura was powerful enough to deflect it without trouble.

Surprisingly, the line that he had attached to my right arm before my transformation wouldn't come off no matter what I did. Even blasting it with my aura didn't shake it loose! Just what was it connected to?

Perhaps if I had the Ascalon instead of lending it to Xenovia, I might have been able to do something, but there was no use worrying about that now. I would have to wait until we caught up to her to sever the tether.

There was something else troubling as well. My armor was supposed to be incredibly strong, but each time Saji landed a blow on me, the impact shook throughout my body. The pain was getting sharper and sharper, and I could feel bruises forming beneath my Scale Mail. I was taking damage!

“...I’m going to win... I’ll beat you, here and now... I’ll take the first step toward fulfilling my dream...!”

Just what was I dealing with here? My opponent was hacking up blood!

At that moment, I suddenly remembered something Tannin had said to me during my training: *“Listen up, kid. The most fearful attack in the Rating Game is something called a Loaded Blow.”*

“A Loaded Blow...?”

“Yeah. People fight for all sorts of purposes. Desire, pleasure, greed, a home, women, wealth, a dream. Those kinds of thoughts get mixed into one’s actions. Some folks have devoted their lives to Rating Games. But out of all the participants in this chaotic melting pot, there’s one type you should be most afraid of. Those who can use a Loaded Blow.”

“So what is it? A special move? A Sacred Gear? Magic?”

“No. Look at your fist, kid. What are you holding?”

“...I don’t know.”

“You’ve put something in it. A dream, or maybe your soul. That’s what it means to throw everything into your punch. And that’s the most dangerous attack of all. Against regular strikes, you might be able to defend yourself to some extent with knowledge and preparation. But a Loaded Blow will resound deep into your core. Not even the magic and science of the underworld can explain it fully. Yet anyone who’s tasted it will know. Yep, it’s that bad. An opponent who can unleash that kind of attack is the real thing—a rival to be feared. Never try to engage them. Even if they are lower in level than you are, a hit like that will be enough to tilt the scales of a match. No matter what you do, it will penetrate your defenses.”

I finally understood. Saji’s attacks were breaking through to me. They were somehow penetrating my armor and reaching my body!

“That spirit. That’s probably the Prison Dragon Vritra dormant in his Sacred Gear responding to his depth of emotion...”

Hey, dragon-type Sacred Gears are scary stuff, Ddraig. Now I really don’t know

what's going on! I thought back.

“Hyoudoooooooouuuuu!”

Even as the harsh reality of the situation became evident to him, Saji refused to relent.

I responded in kind, and we clashed again.

“Let me ask you one thing! What are they like?! Are the rumors true? Are your Prez’s breasts as soft as marshmallows?! Is a woman’s body truly like untouched pudding?!”

I was struck by the intensity burning in Saji’s eyes!

Seizing his chance, he launched another line, latched it onto a bench behind me, and swung it my way with all his strength. I quickly crossed my arms to shield myself, and the weaponized piece of furniture shattered into countless fragments on impact.

That was the amount of force Saji was putting into his strikes.

“What was going on in that head of yours when you touched them?! Damn youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

I could’ve sworn his hits were even stronger now than when he’d been talking about his dream!

Next, he launched a barrage of additional tethers into a nearby furniture store and began to swing a large haul of household items over his head in my direction! Was he planning on smashing them all down onto me at once?!

Whoosh!

With the objects raining down, I let loose a minimally charged burst with my Dragon Shot! Adjusting the power level like this sure wasn’t easy! Keeping it up was swiftly going to become difficult!

Thump!

The blast of red-tinged demonic power swept the assembled items away in a single burst, and yet...

Slam!

Something collided with my back! Glancing around, I saw that Saji had adjusted the trajectory of one of his lines, hurling a wardrobe into me from behind! It hadn't done too much to me, but the impact had vibrated through my body.

Even if I wasn't severely injured, this kind of blow clearly wasn't healthy! If we kept on going like this, the effects would start piling up!

"You think I don't want to do that?! I want to rub breeeeeeaaaaasts!"

Saji was crying tears of frustration!

"I've never even seen one before! I've been praying to cast my eyes on a real-life nipple my entire life! And you get to touch them as much as you like?! Dammit, Hyoudooooouuuuuu!"

Smack!

I punched Saji down to the ground, but he immediately rose back to his feet! Ugh! Talk about spirited!

"But, Hyoudou! Breasts aren't what I want most! I want to be a teacher! A teacher, dammit! Is that so bad?! Why does everyone have to mock our dreams all the time?!" Then he began to howl at me, or rather, to the viewers. "We didn't announce our aspirations to you all just for you to laugh at us!"

"I'm not! What makes you think I'd mock something you're willing to risk your life over?!" I exclaimed in reply.

Saji came flying at me, and I hurled my fist at him! One strike wasn't enough, however, so I had to hit him yet again!

His face was beginning to swell, some of his teeth were clearly broken, and blood was dripping from his mouth.

Still, Saji stood, coming at me over and over. He was stubborn, foolish to the point of—

"I'm going to surpass you! Me! Today!"

The declaration resounded heavily through my armor, all the way to my heart.

I must have struck him at least a dozen more times after that.

“Hah... Hah...”

Before I knew it, the sound of Saji’s ragged breath was growing fainter and fainter.

He should have been at his limit. His mouth was lacerated in numerous places, so much so that he couldn’t stanch the flow of blood anymore. Intelligible speech was beyond him now.

Bruises dotted his face, one even holding his left eye shut.

He was unsteady on his feet, his body swaying from side to side. A few of his fingers were twisted in unnatural directions. And yet in spite of all that, he continued to glare my way, a piercing glint in his eye.

“Come on, Saji! Come on! Sajiiii! Don’t tell me you’ve had enough?! You’re not going to let it end like this, are you?! I thought you said that idiots like us kept on pushing forward to the very end?!”

He edged slowly forward, step by step.

Broken and battered, he refused to run away. Without ever breaking eye contact with me, he charged forward.

His physical state reminded me of how I’d looked in my match against Riser Phenex. I’d witnessed my sorry state on the recordings. Thoroughly pummeled, yet still pressing on because I’d needed to reach my opponent.

“You poured your soul into your training, right? Well, so did I.”

I could feel a tremendous pressure emanating from Saji. I was clearly the better fighter, but still, a terrible sense of fear seized me.

No matter how many times I hit him, he wouldn’t quit...

Never had I imagined I’d encounter a foe who instilled such tremendous dread in me...

Hey, Riser Phenex. I’m guessing this is what you must have felt when I kept coming for you? I get it now. The reason you kept knocking me to the ground...

“Saji, I’m going to beat you.”

He threw another punch at me with his mangled arm. It was slow, and I evaded easily and delivered a counter.

Thud!

“—.”

My attack caught Saji square in the cheek. The result was instantaneous. He immediately lost consciousness.

Astonishingly, he had still managed to grab hold of my right arm, his grip so unbelievably firm that I couldn't shake him off.

He was out cold but still clung to me.

Then a bright light began to envelop his body.

I refused to take my eyes off Saji until he had completely vanished. Something in me worried that if I stopped watching him, even for a moment, he would wake up.

“One of Sona Sitri's Pawns has retired.”

“Koneko.” I retracted the mask covering my face. “Can you hold my hand?”

“...Issei?” she asked with a puzzled look.

“I've never had to beat a friend up before. I knew I would need to do this. I knew, but still...”

She took my trembling fist in her hands. Even through my gauntlet, I could feel her warmth.

“You were cool, Issei. I'm proud of you.”

Never had I needed to hear those words so badly before.

—○●○—

My fight with Saji over, I broke open the door of a nearby vending machine and fetched myself a bottle of water. Koneko decided to get something to drink, too.

Dammit.

I couldn't stop shaking. Was this because of my armor? Sure, I had taken a lot of damage from the fight, but I should have still been able to keep going.

An announcement had just informed us that one of our Knights was out of the Rating Game. Kiba? Xenovia? I had no way of knowing who. One of them had prevailed; the other was wounded.

Our opponents had lost a Knight and a Rook as well.

That left us with six pieces remaining, while the other side had four. Although we had a numerical advantage, it was no time to let our guard down. In my present state, I had less than twenty minutes left before I ran out of strength. We had to get this over with as soon as possible.

“...Issei.” Koneko pointed to my right arm.

Right, even now, with Saji defeated, his line was still attached to me. Not even activating my armor had been enough to get rid of it. There was no doubting that it led into the Sitri home base.

What was it supposed to do? It certainly couldn't be good. The fact that it hadn't vanished with Saji meant he must have poured considerable power into it.

Saji... What are you thinking?

At that moment, a voice came through our communication earpieces.

“Everyone on offense, can you hear me? We're advancing to the other team's home base.”

It was the prez. She was finally moving out. The opening and middle stages of the match were over, and it was time for the final spurt!

I took a deep breath and looked at Koneko. “Let's go.”

She gave me a quick nod as we proceeded into the last stage of the battle.

A central atrium occupied the middle of the shopping center, filled with a ring of benches that encircled a clock installed atop a large pillar. It was the kind of place where shoppers would stop for a break during their spending sprees.

Having reached this landmark, we came to a halt.

Why, you may ask? Because the chairwoman was standing right in front of us!

“Greetings, Issei Hyoudou, Koneko Toujou. I see, so this is the Red Dragon

Emperor in all his glory. I can sense a tremendous force inside you. It's only natural that people see you as a threat," she remarked calmly.

A barrier protected the chairwoman. Her two Bishops, both members of the student council, were the ones maintaining it. The line extending from my right arm ended at one of those Bishops.

It can't be...

Was their scheme to channel my powers into this Bishop to fuel the shield? If they were using the energy of the Red Dragon Emperor, it would be all but impenetrable!

If only Kiba or Xenovia had been there. Cutting through that barrier with a Holy Sword was our best chance of destroying it.

Before long, the student council's bespectacled vice-chairwoman, Shinra, made an appearance. She, too, was an incredible beauty, with a surprisingly sexy and mature body!

Following after her, from the direction that Koneko and I had approached, was Kiba. So Xenovia was the one who had been defeated.

"...You're a bold one, Sona, making your way to the center of the battlefield like this," someone stated.

It was the prez's voice! I looked over my shoulder to find that she had indeed arrived.

"I could say the same of you, Rias," replied the chairwoman.

"Indeed. We've reached the closing act of our bout. I must admit, things have played out rather differently than I'd expected..." The prez's expression was stern.

Indeed, the plan had been for Kiba and Xenovia to target the chairwoman. To that end, I had served as a decoy. Unfortunately, our enemy had seen right through that tactic!

Was the chairwoman a cut above us when it came to Rating Games? No, I had to believe in the prez!

All of a sudden, my vision felt distant.

Huh...? What's going on...?

I staggered where I stood. My mind was growing foggy, my strength ebbing. Before I knew it, I had fallen to my knees.

“...Issei?”

The prez quickly noticed what had come over me, just as Asia activated her Sacred Gear and its healing ability. A gentle light enveloped me, emitting a pale-green color. It wiped away the pain, but the dazed sensation remained!

I watched as Rias retrieved our team's stock of Phoenix Tears but stopped. She had probably realized that if Asia's Twilight Healing couldn't fix this problem, then the tears would similarly have little effect.

My other team members had caught on to my predicament, too, and watched me in consternation.

The chairwoman broke into a small smile. “Neither Asia's Twilight Healing nor your Phoenix Tears will do any good. I've watched the recording of your match with Riser, and I realized just how formidable Hyoudou is. He will never give up fighting for the sake of his friends, for himself, and above all, for you, Rias.” Sona paused there for a moment before turning to me. “Straightforward combat would never be enough to best you. I can tell you're the kind to keep getting up no matter how many times you collapse. As far as we're concerned, your strength of will is equally as impressive as the powers of the Red Dragon Emperor. Yes, you believe any enemy can be defeated so long as you don't quit. That mindset feeds into your abilities, increasing your power far beyond its original potential. It's your greatest weapon, Hyoudou.”

She had a point. That strength of will was practically my only redeeming feature...



“And so we had no choice but to remove you from the board another way.”

One of the opposing team’s Bishops lifted a plastic satchel.

It was filled with red liquid—blood, perhaps. That pouch was at the end of the line still connected to me.

No way...

However, the chairwoman confirmed it. “This is your blood. You may have been reincarnated as a demon, but you were once human. And when a human loses half their blood, the result is fatal. You’re familiar with the rules of the Rating Game, aren’t you? If a fighter is rendered unable to continue, they are removed from the field for medical treatment.”

Saji! Damn you! So this was your plan from the very beginning?!

Gah! My body had lost all strength!

Kiba threw a dagger-shaped Holy Demon Sword into the air, slicing through the line—but my blood continued to gush out, only now onto the floor. Ah, so it was the line itself that was bleeding me dry...

“It’s too late. You’ve already lost too much. You should be removed from battle any minute now,” the chairwoman declared, her voice stone-cold!

“...Sona. You—!” The prez rushed toward me, her face brimming with anguish.

We had all been outsmarted...

“Yes, Saji used his Sacred Gear to bleed Hyoudou drop by drop, even as he was beaten down. It took him a lot of practice and precise control to adapt a technique normally used to suck energy to one that can drain blood, but he rose to meet the challenge.”

He’d kept getting back up not only because of his pride and dreams, but also to stall?! Apparently, the process was slow. Saji had been willing to sacrifice himself just to buy enough time to pull it off?!

He could have tried delaying me simply by running away. But instead, he had confronted me face-to-face.

Saji! You’re insane!

All that had been so he could win to my face!

“You should be close to being retired, Hyoudou. With all the blood you’ve lost, I can’t imagine you’ve got more than one or two attacks left. Your armor is solid. Your attack power is strong. But there are a great many ways to defeat you. Even if we can’t best you in a contest of force, you will nonetheless be judged as unable to fight according to the rules.”

I couldn’t even stand anymore... I was done for...

A strategy like this had never even occurred to me. Were the chairwoman’s tactics better than ours?!

Sona directed a question to the prez. “Rias, what are you betting on this match? I... I’ve staked my life on it. My dream won’t be easy to attain. If I don’t take down the obstacles that lie in front of me, I’ll never be able to open up a pathway to success... And so, Rias, I’ll destroy your pride and reputation!”

The prez made a sour face at this declaration of war. She must have been frustrated beyond belief! There was no denying that she had started this match with the advantage, to the point where our victory must have seemed all but certain.

Yet the battle had now come to this. Losing to what should have been a weaker opponent would ruin her reputation! That was what the chairwoman was trying to do here!

Sona Sitri! Just how calculating are you?!

The chairwoman’s attention then shifted to me. “Saji... He was always going on about how he wanted to surpass you. To him, you’re a fellow Pawn, a friend, and a rival who he needs to overcome.”

I could feel the truth behind those words. I had experienced the depth of his fighting spirit and aspirations firsthand during our bout. There could be no denying them.

Saji must have been gunning for me from the very start.

“But you have a legendary dragon inside you, and so he’s always had an inferiority complex. I... I wanted him to know he didn’t need anything like that

to fight against you. It seems like he finally got it. That line didn't disappear even after you beat him. It's a testimony to how strongly he feels. Since you're about to leave the battle, let me say this: Just as you've had your sights set square on rising to the top, Saji's have been locked on defeating you. You aren't the only Pawn going all out to fulfill your dreams! Remember who it is who beat you! Genshirou Saji!"

"I'm going to surpass you! Me! Today!" What Saji had said to me near the end of our fight reverberated in my mind.

Saji... So all his training was to take me down?

Dammit. Saji. You're amazing. No matter how many times I knocked you down, all you were thinking about was beating me. Even if you couldn't take me out directly, you had faith in your allies to finish the job if you could just deliver the necessary blow...

You don't need to worry anymore. I'm done for. Your attacks have bested me.

But I'm not going to disappear without showing off my newest special technique first!

I mustered what little remained of my strength and pulled myself to my feet, retreating a short distance until all remaining members of both the Gremory and Sitri Familias were in view.

If I was going to be retired, I would at least go out with a perverted bang! I raised my hands in front of me and set my sights on the prez's bust!

"Before I go...I'll fulfill my worldly passions..."

Right. I was about to be removed from the game anyway. That being the case, there was no reason not to show all my cards! I poured my remaining energy into my mind, into my perverted fantasies!

What remained of my aura enveloped my body! I wasn't turning it into destructive power but instead channeling it into my head!

"Arise, my lust! Be free, my worldly passions!"

Using the power of the Red Dragon Emperor, I would aim for new heights! My body only needed to hold on just a little longer! This would trump all my

previous exploits! If done correctly, this new technique would be unparalleled!

“Expand, O world of my dreams!”

At that moment, a mysterious state of being unfolded around me. The female members of both the Gremory and Sitri Familias must have felt it instinctively, as they all moved to cover their bodies.

Be easy, everyone. My new technique doesn't inflict damage. It isn't nearly as flashy as my Dress Break one.

Then I called out to the prez—or rather, to her breasts, “Let me hear your voice!”

“Issei, are you all right...?” came a cute voice from those tits. *“You'll get in trouble if you do anything too outlandish...”*

I see. Hmm.

I could hear them. I could hear them! Awesome!

“Prez, you're worried about me, aren't you? That I'll end up hurting myself if I do anything too strange.”

A look of astonishment fell over her. “Issei! H-how do you...?”

I turned next to the chairwoman—to her breasts. “What are you thinking?”

“Has he developed a way of reading people's minds? Uh-oh, Sona's in trouble!”

It seemed like she'd already figured it out...sort of.

Evidently, boobs didn't always have the same personality as the person they belonged to. The prez's sounded like a little girl, while the chairwoman's resembled her sister, Serafall Leviathan.

“Sona, you're wondering whether my new special move lets me read your mind, right?”

The chairwoman blanched at my inquiry.

“Heh-heh-heh, almost, but not quite. I wanted to hear what was going on close to all of your hearts. Directly from your breasts, in their own words!”

I struck a victorious pose as I shouted out with pride: “My new technique, Boob-Lingual! With this, I can hear the voices of women’s tits...! Ha-ha-ha! All I have to do is ask, and they’ll reveal to me the ungarnished truth! Could there be a more powerful way of knowing your opponent’s thoughts?! Ugh, I don’t have enough blood left...”

I wouldn’t stop now! It was all or nothing! The blood loss was liable to kill me, but at least I would have no regrets! These were voices only I could hear! I’d wished for this for so long!

During my stint in the mountains, I’d had to deny my own sex drive, my overwhelming craving for breasts.

No matter how much I’d wished to see them, there weren’t any nude magazines up on that mountain, and of course, there weren’t any actual women, either. It had just been the dragon and me.

Day in, day out, I’d lived a life of meager survival as he chased me around. So what do you think happened to me in that environment—a modern, impressionable teenage boy?

It had started with me wanting to talk to girls, to meet them—and ended with me grasping for something akin to an erotic sense of spiritual awakening.

I’d heard about famous monks and the like who sought seclusion up in the mountains to attain enlightenment. Such individuals sought to abandon their worldly desires. I guess you could say I was the exact opposite, seeking only to pursue them.

Thus, I’d arrived at something else, a wellspring of eroticism.

It had been nighttime. I was wrapping myself in leaves, thinking endlessly about breasts.

During my training, I’d tried a little Zen meditation. Once or twice, I’d even sat beneath a waterfall, my mind filled with nothing but worldly passions.

I wanted to grasp them. Touch them. Suck them. Poke them. Pinch them.

After countless days in this state of mental perseverance, I came to a realization—I wanted to converse with boobs.

I was so grateful and blessed to know so many wonderful breasts that I wanted to know what they were thinking and feeling.

At the time, I didn't have enough power to make those desires a reality. But with the gifts of the Red Dragon Emperor at my disposal, the possibilities were endless! And now here we were!

"Hey! Breasts of the Bishop over there! Talk to me!"

"Nooooo, don't!" cried the young Bishop girl, covering herself. It was far too late, however.

"Kibaaaaa! I'm so excited to be standing on the same battlefield as Kiba!"

"What?! So you've only got eyes for Kiba?! What about you, breasts of the other Bishop?!"

When I turned my gaze to my next target, she fell to her knees. "Stop it! Gross!"

"Hyoudou is terrifying... That armor makes him look so strong and intimidating, so I wonder why I only ever see him as this perverted freak...?"

...

...Getting dismissed twice in rapid succession was too much for me. I was at my limit...

Dammit! Maybe I don't always want to hear what they're thinking!

I glanced around—only to find everyone staring at me, their eyes twitching strangely.

...Huh? Why aren't they all surprised at my incredible new skill?

The chairwoman was grimacing, the prez letting out a sigh as she held a hand to her forehead.

"Rias... This is too much..."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's certainly a formidable move, but if he's going to invade people's privacy like that, no female demon is ever going to want to fight you."

“Yes, I’ll have to give him a stern talking to...”

Huuuuuh?! What’s with that reaction?! This is an incredibly useful ability! I mean, with this, I can—

“...You really are a pervert!”

“Sick freak!”

I received a full-blown dressing down from the breasts of everyone gathered, Gremory and Sitri Familias alike.

“—.”

I was left speechless! Impossible. I could hear them all as if they were standing right next to me.

See! This technique is perfect! I thought confidently.

“Asia’s breasts, what are you thinking?!”

“Stupid Issei, he’s so badly hurt, and this is all he can think about? B-but it’s nothing I can’t heal!”

Ah, so Asia’s breasts were the hot-and-cold tsundere type!

Who would have thought that boobs could reveal a person’s innermost thoughts?!

“...I thought you were cool... But you’re a disgusting Red Dragon Emperor. The worst.”

As usual, Koneko’s remarks were scathing!

Augh...! This was no good. My consciousness was fading. I had lost too much blood.

Before I left, I had to learn the chairwoman’s battle strategy!

“Chairwoman Sona’s breasts! Tell me about your strategy!”

“So this special ward made by the Bishops, right? It’s a decoy. Sona isn’t here. It’s an illusion. It’s like only her spirit is here, her aura. She’s actually up on the roof. The idea is to trick you all into attacking the ward, to exhaust and weaken you all. Pretty clever, don’t you think?”

So the one we were looking at was a mirage. She wasn't here in person.

In any event, I had to tell the others what I had learned from the chairwoman's boobs.

"Everyone, the chairwoman, behind the ward...it's a trick. The Bishops are projecting an illusion of her... They want us to waste our energy here... The real chairwoman is on the roof! She's transmitting her spirit here to communicate with us remotely... That's why Koneko couldn't sense her on the roof earlier. I guess that's why my Boob-Lingual technique worked on her, too, then...?"

Having relayed what I had to, I fell to the ground.

"Issei!" Asia began to run my way, but the chairwoman's Queen moved to stop her.

Asia stopped where she was and began to pray. A faint light wrapped around her body, slowly spreading through her surroundings. Was this the fruit of her training, her ranged healing ability at work?

She should have known that healing me at this stage would be pointless. But her gentle nature no doubt meant she was still worried about me. That girl truly was a good person. And with her breasts' hot-and-cold personalities, she was unrivaled!

"I've been waiting for you to do that!" one of the opposing Bishops called out.

The image of the chairwoman vanished, the barrier dissipating as the Bishop stepped foot into Asia's healing aura.

Was she trying to benefit from her healing power? It didn't look like she was injured.

Then she raised her hands into the air and cried, "Reverse!"

Flash!

The pale-green light instantly transformed into an ominous deep red.

"Ah..."

At that moment, a white glow shrouded Asia's body as she began to disappear. What?!

“...Reversing a restorative aura deals damage... Argento’s healing abilities are so powerful that reversing them...” The Bishop flashed Asia a triumphant grin as she spat out blood.

What’s happening right now?!

“...I’ve defeated their healer... Chairwoman...,” the Bishop managed before vanishing with Asia.

Dammit. They took out Asia, too... I—I...

My body was engulfed in light. I was already finished... I wished I could march right into the enemy base and promote to a Queen... But I had been defeated before even getting the chance. I was pathetic!

That I had been able to use my Boob-Lingual technique did bring me some comfort, though...

Saji. I—

“One of Sona Sitri’s Bishops has retired.”

“One of Rias Gremory’s Bishops and her Pawn have retired.”

VIP

I—Azazel—burst into laughter in the VIP room.

“...So this is the current Red Dragon Emperor?” remarked one of the big-name onlookers.

The audience was aghast.

Given the absurd new technique they had just witnessed through the viewing monitors, that was natural.

Boob-Lingual.

It was just too ludicrous. For a second, even I, whose open-mindedness about all things sexual was widely known, couldn’t understand what was happening. And if I was taken aback, the others must have been appalled.

On the monitor, Rias’s face had turned bright red. I felt sorry for her, but there was no denying that this sure was interesting.

That said, this Boob-Lingual technique... It wasn't particularly flashy, but it sure looked effective.

So long as a woman led the opposing team, it could sway the outcome of the entire match. The ability seemingly let Issei learn a female enemy's plans. There was no special move more terrifying.

Not only that, but it also worked against mental projections.

Used properly, it could potentially be undefeatable. Still, Issei certainly had a knack for coming up with tricks that got women to hate him. I'd thought he wanted to be *popular* with girls.

It was a shame that he didn't seem to have realized how astounding this technique was, using it only to fuel his sexual desires.

Rias would probably threaten to ban him from future matches if he used it again. At this rate, they wouldn't be able to participate in any more Rating Games. Most Familias had at least a few female members, after all.

Vali. I can see why you, who are so much higher in rank than Issei Hyoudou, have taken such an interest in him, even though he's supposedly the weakest Red Dragon Emperor there has ever been.

Yes, this was an exciting development.

That just about summed it up. Someone who you could watch endlessly without getting bored was the best opponent for a battle maniac.

So, Vali. Issei keeps growing in different ways from you, developing his powers. What are you going to do? How are you going to fight him? He keeps on exceeding all expectations.

Admittedly, I was looking forward to it. It would certainly be fun to watch.

In all likelihood, it could end up being the greatest showdown between Red and White of all time.

And then there was that Reversal technique the Sitri Familia was using. That was the fruit of *our* research. It was true that we fallen angels had started offering technical assistance to demons, but that move was still in the research stages.

Did Armaros or Sariel offer it to Sona Sitri's Familia in exchange for data from the match? I wondered. *What a bother...*

We were still conducting trials on that technique, meaning it was still unpredictable. Yet Sona Sitri and her Familia were using it regardless. That was how much they wanted to win—no matter the cost, no matter the risk...

There were some fallen angels who had taken to ripping Sacred Gears from their hosts and embedding them into themselves. The Reversal was similar to such cases in that it granted the recipient a technique that wasn't originally theirs. However, doing so was known to be dangerous, shortening their life spans and damaging their natural abilities.

Issei had similarly shaved away at his life force when he had acquired the White Dragon Emperor's Dividing power. There were, of course, cases where someone could receive a new technique without injuring themselves—as Kiba had—but trying to certainly wasn't recommended.

Incidentally, I had designed my artificial Sacred Gears for my own personal use from the get-go, so they carried no such risk.

I almost felt guilty about this, but I was going to have to advise that the Reversal move be banned from use in future matches. I didn't want to destroy these youngsters' lives before they had even fully begun.

To think that the Reversal would have been used like this. It was initially only meant to invert general opposites, holy into demonic, darkness into light, and so forth. But here they were, deftly altering their opponents' unique powers...

I had seen for myself how far the Sitri Familia was willing to go. I couldn't wait to behold what happened next.

Still, what would the others do now that Issei was gone? Would Rias and Akeno lose their will to keep going?

"Oh-ho-ho, what an interesting battle."

The graybeard geezer Odin was seemingly enjoying himself as he watched the monitor. To think the selfish old clod was actually praising someone.

"Sirzechs," he called out.

“Yes?”

“That lad with the dragon-type Sacred Gear...”

“Issei Hyoudou? The Red Dragon Emperor?”

Surprisingly, Odin shook his head. “No, the Sitri Familia’s Pawn.”

Ah, so he’s more interested in that one.

“He’s a good demon,” Odin continued. “Be sure to look after him. He’ll be quite the fighter one day. It was no small feat defeating that Red Dragon Emperor lad. This is what I enjoy about watching you demons play around with your Rating Games. The weak can evolve before your very eyes. Yes, this is what battles are all about!”

Odin was paying the greatest possible compliment to someone he’d been unaware of a few hours ago.

“Right, right! You get it, don’t you, Pops?” Serafall said, ecstatic.

She was undoubtedly overjoyed to hear her sister’s Familia being praised like this. Never mind that she had been watching on the verge of tears up till now.

Sona Sitri’s Pawn. Genshirou Saji, wasn’t it? It was fair to say that my estimation of him had increased even more than Issei during this match.

This Rating Game was being broadcast throughout the underworld. Against all expectations, this heretofore nameless dragon-type Sacred Gear host may well have now exceeded the fame of the Red Dragon Emperor.

Issei, Rias. There are going to be all kinds of difficulties in store for you.

Endgame

Now that Issei and Asia had left the battlefield, there were only four of us remaining: me—Yuuto Kiba—the president, Akeno, and Koneko.

The other side had three fighters left: the chairwoman, Shinra, and the other Bishop.

Our Familia had been expected to dominate, but there’d been several upsets. The supposedly superior side had lost half its members. I could practically hear

the disappointment of the high-class demons watching.

The president's reputation was sure to suffer because of this. We couldn't afford to let it fall any further than it already had.

Issei, the life of our Familia, was gone. That was a considerable loss... I was managing to push on despite it, but I was worried about the president. If Asia were still with us, she would certainly be in shock, too.

For now, we remaining members simply had to keep going. As shocking as Issei's defeat had been, so long as it didn't affect our performance, there shouldn't be a problem. And yet...

Losing Asia had also been a nasty surprise. How had they known to use that Reverse technique while she was employing her healing abilities—her ranged version, no less? Asia's restorative powers were immense. The damage caused by that inversion must have been immeasurable.

More importantly, Asia had been defeated in a split second. The other team's Bishop, Hanakai was her name, had also been retired. Chairwoman Sona must have predicted we would try to heal at range, and this had been her countermeasure. She had also understood that Asia's Sacred Gear didn't discriminate between friend and foe. If the other team had used that Reverse move while we were all receiving treatment...we would have been wiped out. It was a frightening strategy.

That was just how much foresight the chairwoman possessed. Hanakai's sacrifice was proof of the Sitri Familia's bond. To me, it seemed even stronger than ours. Such a tour de force was only possible if one truly believed in their allies.

Then there was Issei's new technique... There wasn't anything I could say about that. Still, if it worked against all women, it could be quite dangerous. Now was hardly the time to ponder such things, however.

Chairwoman Sona wasn't planning to win this match through raw strength, but by turning our own immense power against us with careful planning. This was what the Rating Game was all about. Might alone wasn't enough to guarantee victory!

The president rose to her feet, glancing up above. She was probably trying to locate the chairwoman up on the roof.

Even having lost Issei, she kept her cool, as was to be expected of a King. If a King were to lose their composure, it would have a disastrous effect on the rest of their Familia.

“Koneko, can you sense her?” the president asked.

“...Yes. I couldn’t earlier, but I can detect her *qi* coming from the roof. She must have been projecting her aura earlier and using a technique to suppress her presence and conceal her true location.” Koneko’s ears twitched as she spoke, probably as she tried to pinpoint the chairwoman.

Those cat ears of hers really were cute. She still seemed ready to fight, even with Issei gone. It was a relief to know the others were still raring to go.

I pointed my blade at Shinra and the other Bishop. “Now then, how shall we do this? As fellow swordsmen, what do you say we decide this with our blades?”

“Fine with me,” Shinra answered. “In chess, Pawns most often promote into Queens. But now and then, they might become a Knight, which can change the battle’s outcome. There may be a great many differences between chess and the Rating Game—but this should be a good fight.”

And so my duel against Shinra was decided. As for the remaining Bishop, Kusaka...

Akeno’s golden aura appeared in the corner of my vision, crackling with energy. There was a strange hue to her aura, and her teary eyes radiated a cold, forlorn feeling.

“...I wanted to show Issei my dedication...,” she muttered as she took a dazed, wobbly step forward.

I could sense an unusual feeling of pressure emanating from her, something that couldn’t be described in words.

“...I wanted to show Issei my dedication...by using this disgusting power in front of him... But now...”

She slowly raised her arms before her. “I’ll never forgive you.”

Her sadist side was now on full display! It was her most dangerous form! I hadn’t expected that our usually stoic vice president would respond to Issei’s loss like this!

“...I’ll erase you.” With those words of quiet fury, a huge ball of lightning shot from her hands, speeding toward the Bishop Kusaka!

Booooooooooom!

“Reverse!”

At the moment of impact, Kusaka spread her hands and tried to invert the effects of the lightning, and yet...

Zzzzzap! Bang!

A fierce onslaught of electricity engulfed her!

She hadn’t been able to alter the lightning in time and took a direct hit!

Within a split second, she was surrounded by a white glow and disappeared from the stage!

“It’s no use. She tried to reverse my attack, but I unleashed both electricity *and* light. There was no inverting it all.”

“One of Sona Sitri’s Bishops has retired.”

“They can’t alter it if they don’t know what they’re targeting.”

As Akeno had declared, it looked like Kusaka hadn’t yet mastered how to use that Reversal ability. Akeno directed her hands next at the Queen, Shinra, ignoring my duel with her!

The shock of losing Issei and her anger over not being able to show him the power of her Holy Lightning had left her blind to me!

It might have been that feeling that had helped her come to terms with those abilities, but it was an unexpected development nonetheless. I hadn’t realized Issei meant so much to her!

“Gah!”

Shinra recognized she was in danger and bolted away!

Crack! Booooooooooom!

A bolt of lightning lanced straight for her! Any demon hit by that would be defenseless! Akeno's newly unleashed powers combined electricity with a demon's greatest weakness, holy light. It was frightening to imagine what the outcome might be.

Shinra, however, successfully evaded and fled to the back of the shopping mall.

I took off after her at breakneck speed! When it came to agility, I was second to none!

I created a fresh Holy Demon Sword as I ran, bringing it down on Shinra when I caught up to her. However, she parried the strike with her halberd. I had no way of knowing when she would bring out that Counter-type Sacred Gear!

At that moment, she retrieved a small vial from her pocket—the Phoenix Tears! The chairwoman had entrusted them to her Queen.

She threw the vial in my direction and then lashed out at it with her halberd, sending the liquid flying my way!

“Reverse!” she cried.

She was trying to invert that healing potion into something that could knock me out in one hit, similar to what had happened to Asia! I wasted no time transforming my Holy Demon Sword into a water-based blade!

Splash!

The altered liquid merged with the water. When Phoenix Tears combined with something else, they lost their potency. In other words, I had nullified their inverted damaging potential!

“All I needed was the smallest of openings!” Shinra cried, turning her razor-sharp halberd on me!

Her use of the Phoenix Tears had only been meant as a distraction! Yet even so...

Whoosh!

Holy Demon Swords erupted in great numbers all around! The blades shooting out of the ground carved Shinra's halberd into pieces, disarming her.

"At present, I have no openings."

I began to unleash a follow-through attack when she summoned her mirror technique between us. I quickly weakened my attack as much as possible and pushed it into the mirror with only enough force to break through.

Flash! Boooooom!

As the reflective surface cracked, the impact came back to me twofold, but it was nothing I couldn't withstand! I gritted my teeth and raised my left arm into the air.

And then I intoned words of power!

"Saints Peter, Basil, Denis, and the Virgin Mary, heed my call!"

The space around me warped, and I thrust my hand into a rift opening in the air!

"No way! It can't be!" Shinra, realizing what I was doing, exclaimed in disbelief.

"In the name of the Saints who dwell within this blade, I release you—Durendal!"

Yes, what I retrieved from that rift was that legendary Holy Sword, the Durendal!

Xenovia! I'll avenge you here and now!

I followed through with my momentum and brought the holy weapon to bear in a wide slash! The blade made impact, dealing significant damage to its target.

Nonetheless, Shinra didn't activate her Counter-type Sacred Gear. Perhaps she couldn't use it again so soon?

"This was Xenovia's idea. She agreed to relinquish this blade to me in the event that she was rendered unable to fight."

Indeed, she had taught me how to use the Durendal.

“But you aren’t supposed to be able to use Holy Swords...,” Shinra murmured as her body was enveloped by white light.

“You’re right. And that’s something I suffered deeply for... But the situation has changed. Thanks to my Balance Breaker, it seems like I can even handle the Durendal now.”

Vrrrrr...

The weapon was emitting a dull tone. Unlike what was often the case when Xenovia was using it, those vibrations weren’t out of control or overly destructive.

“Wha—?! That’s...! Not even Xenovia has mastered it to that level!” Shinra gaped.

I had a different opinion on the situation. “Xenovia’s aura is one of someone who seeks power, and the Durendal perhaps responds to that when she wields it. However, I choose accuracy over power, ability over strength.”

Even though I had tried to suppress its potential, the shock wave from my attack had still ended up tearing a huge gash through the floor a reasonable distance past Shinra. That would probably reflect poorly on me later.

“Xenovia told me how unruly this weapon is, that it doesn’t like to be tamed by its master, and I see now how right she was. The destruction is more extensive than I had intended... I guess I’m still a way off from fully wielding it.”

“...! This runs contrary to our calculations, Sona! It isn’t Hyoudou we should have been worried about...! Their real ace...! The one we should have been watching most carefully... It’s Yuuto Kiba!”

Those were Shinra’s final words as she disappeared from the stage.

“Sona Sitri’s Queen has retired.”

“My goal has always been to surpass Issei, or rather, the Red Dragon Emperor.”

Our loss against Riser Phenex’s Familia had been beyond vexing. Issei wasn’t the only one who’d refused the outcome back then.

I, Rias Gremory’s Knight, had been unable to protect her.

And then, even after I'd unlocked my Balance Breaker, still I hadn't been able to beat Kokabiel, or take part in the battle against the White Dragon Emperor. I had been of no use at all on either occasion.

It brought me no end of frustration.

I can't take it! Issei!

That was why I restarted my training from scratch with the help of my mentor. I had to improve my swordsmanship.

Perhaps this sort of attitude didn't suit me, but that wouldn't stop me from improving through diligence, hard work, and patience! Getting full of myself just because I'd reached my Balance Breaker would only keep me from accepting my weaknesses!

"And I hate it when people act like the Red Dragon Emperor is the president's only servant!"

You may be aiming to defeat Vali, but my goal has only ever been to serve as my master's sword and stand beside you as your friend and comrade.

Rias Gremory didn't just have the Red Dragon Emperor. She also had my Holy Demon Swords and me.

"I will renew my vow here and now. I will never make my master, Rias Gremory, cry again."

The only remaining opponent was the other team's King, Chairwoman Sona Sitri.

The sky above the shopping mall was white and empty, completely vacant. That was probably because the mall existed in a fabricated realm created solely for the match.

The other three remaining members of our team and I had reached the roof. Chairwoman Sona stood in front of us, wearing a forced smile as she looked our way.

"What are you doing up here?" the president asked.

"A King must survive until the very end. That is their role. If the King is lost, the Rating Game will end then and there, no?"

“...I didn’t mean on such a technical level.”

“Rias, Saji has defeated your Red Dragon Emperor. Neither you nor Issei made any fatal blunders. So don’t underestimate Saji. You aren’t the only ones fighting desperately for your future.”

“I’ve seen that firsthand. Now then, shall we settle this, Sona?” The president stepped forward.

Did she mean to fight the chairwoman one-on-one? Rias was the kind of person who wouldn’t listen if I tried to stop her. However...

“Should there be any danger, I’ll step in immediately to help. I won’t accept any complaints,” I declared.

“...”

The president didn’t respond, but she must have understood. If something happened and she found herself near defeat, I would come to her aid, regardless of any protests.

After all, if our King fell, the battle would be over. And I wasn’t about to let that happen to her.

And so the fateful duel between dear friends began to unfold.

The chairwoman gathered a water-like aura around her and began to give it shape. The mass wasn’t just water, however. It seemed to be formed from liquid scattered all throughout the mall.

This was perhaps to be expected of a member of the House of Sitri, whose members specialized in aqua-based magic. The older sister supposedly excelled at manipulating ice, while the younger specialized in water.

The president’s demonic magic was imbued with the power of destruction, attacks capable of annihilating her enemies. Without even a moment’s hesitation, she unleashed an endless barrage of energy projectiles at her friend the chairwoman, like a machine gun!

Each shot was only around the size of a softball, but I could feel just how highly charged every one was. Clearly, she had taken her summer training very seriously. It was likely only the rule against damaging the battlefield that kept

her from going all out.

Splash. Splooooosh.

Chairwoman Sona manipulated liquid into a wall to shield herself from the president's attacks. When a blast collided, it exploded, removing an equal portion of water. However, as the chairwoman was continuously drawing more water from throughout the shopping mall, her barrier was holding firm.

"Now then, Rias. How about I show you my techniques?"

The chairwoman shaped the gathered liquid with her demonic magic, transforming it into a flock of hawks taking off through the air, serpents slithering across the ground, fierce lions, a pack of wolves, and several large dragon-like figures.

How was she able to create so many things all at once?! Her magical skills looked to be greater even than the president's!

"Just what I've been waiting for, Sona!" Rias declared with a dauntless grin, compressing her destructive power and laying waste to the many approaching constructs.

The maneuver was so incredible that a lesser opponent would have been swept away instantly. Crushing so many of the chairwoman's creatures was an impressive feat.

Both young women possessed an expert understanding of their abilities; the president was a true powerhouse, while the chairwoman was a technical master.

They each braced themselves and loosed their attacks at the exact same moment.

"Resignation acknowledged. Rias Gremory is the victor."

Winner

I woke up after the end of the match on a bed in a hospital room of some sort.

This was the first time I had found myself here.

My condition was more an issue of blood loss than physical injury. From what I gathered, I had been given a transfusion immediately upon my arrival, thanks to which I could now move around relatively freely. I stepped outside to grab a drink from the vending machine corner.

We had won.

That said, Gasper, Xenovia, Asia, and I had all been defeated—a full half of our members. Our Familia, which had entered the match backed by the expectation of a landslide victory, had undoubtedly fallen in status.

In particular, the manner of Gasper's loss so early in the match, and the fact that I, the Red Dragon Emperor, had been bested at all, were particularly damaging to our reputation. As the fight hadn't proceeded as smoothly as anticipated, our evaluation by the high-class demon leaders was harsh.

Kiba's fantastic efforts may have claimed us the victory in the end, but when it came down to it, the Rating Game had been settled by a direct face-off between the two Kings.

It was our first victory, yet it didn't feel like a complete triumph. There was no denying that it had been a strenuous battle. We may have had overwhelming strength and power, but it hadn't been enough.

Hmm... Yep, this is bad!

I shook my head and decided to check on Saji in his room to lighten my mood. We may have been bitter enemies during the fight, but now that it was over, we were back to being friends.

I could start by boasting about the prez's breasts again.

"Take this," came a voice from Saji's room—Sirzechs's.

The door was slightly ajar, so I peeked inside. Saji was sitting on his bed, with Sirzechs and the chairwoman standing beside him.

Sirzechs had just handed Saji something: a small, expensive-looking box.

"E-er... This is for...?" Saji was trembling nervously.

"An award for the outstanding performance that you gave in the Rating Game," Sirzechs answered with a smile.

“I—I... I lost against Hyoudou... I don’t deserve this...,” Saji muttered, his fists tightening in frustration as he clutched at his bedsheets.

“That’s true. But in the end, you also defeated him, the Red Dragon Emperor. We were all watching your battle with great interest. Even the Norse god Odin spoke highly of you.” Sirzechs paused there, retrieving a medal from the box and attaching it to Saji’s chest. “Don’t disparage yourself. You are the kind of demon who can aim for the top. It brings me great pleasure to meet a youth with such a promising future ahead of him. Devote yourself to your pursuits. I have high hopes for you.” With that, he patted Saji on the head. “No matter how many years or decades it takes, never give up. You can become a Rating Game teacher.”

At these words of praise, Saji’s eyes overflowed with an endless torrent of tears.

“...Saji, a great many people witnessed your bravery today. You fought brilliantly,” Chairwoman Sona stated, her eyes radiating calm and self-assurance.

She was probably overjoyed. Despite the loss, her prided servant and her Familia had earned favor with many demon bigwigs.

Saji brushed his fingers against the medal on his chest before wiping away his tears and nodding confidently. “...Yes... Thank you!”

It would have been rude for me to hang around any longer, so I made my way back to my room.

Congrats, Saji.

Here I thought Vali was my only rival, the one person whom I had to defeat. But I had been wrong.

I’d have to apologize to Saji when I had the chance.

Hey, which one of us do you think is going to become a high-class demon first and make all our dreams come true? I won’t lose! Never! The next time we fight, I will be the winner! So I’m looking forward to a rematch sometime, Genshirou Saji, my rival.

I spotted Rias just as I was about to enter my room.

“Prez.”

She had noticed me, too, perking up slightly. And so we entered my hospital room and began to have a chat.

“Good work during the match, Issei. You did well. But don’t embarrass me like that, okay? Your sex drive really is over the top, you know.” There was a hint of reluctance behind her smile.

Ahhhhh, I’ve gone and embarrassed her again...

“S-sorry... My new techniques and power-ups tend to be pretty perverted...”

“That technique has been banned from use in future Rating Games.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! Are you serious?!”

No way! Seriously?! Why?! Ah, because it was so indecent?!

“Because we won’t be able to fight against female opponents if you use it.”

“Ugh, if you’re okay with it, then I’ll accept that...” I nodded with tears in my eyes.

What a shame! To think I would only ever be able to use it in combat this once! Hold on, did that mean I could still use it outside of the Rating Game, though, in real-life battles?

The prez gave me a strained sort of look. “Still, we finally have our first victory under our belt. We fared better than last time, but we still lost you, Asia, Xenovia, and Gasper. Even if we’ve been called one of the most talented and powerful Familias alive today, none of that will mean anything if we can’t make a good show of ourselves on the field. We might have the odds on our side, but that isn’t to say we’re invincible.”

It was just as she said.

Had we taken one wrong step during our match with the chairwoman’s Familia, things could have turned out differently. Our opponents’ chances might have been slim, but they had put up a desperate fight, pushing forward in the belief that they could find a way to victory.

If we let ourselves get overconfident or let our guard down, we wouldn't be able to win matches that should easily be ours.

Today had been a powerful reminder of that.

It was a difficult thing, this Rating Game. And the same could be said for combat, too.

Just when I thought the path to becoming a high-class demon like the prez was opening up before me, it suddenly felt farther away than ever.

Still, it wasn't impossibly distant. One day, I would get there...

"Then again, both Akeno and Koneko managed to come to terms with who they are thanks to this match. On that count, I couldn't be happier," Rias said, radiating gentleness.

"Yes, me too! I know we won, but it still kind of feels like a loss. But I'm so happy Koneko and Akeno are moving forward!"

"It's all because of you, Issei. Everyone in this Familia is breaking through their limitations, and they have you to thank for it. You've helped me smash past my hindrances as well. I'm so grateful."

"I—I didn't do anything. I've only been trying to keep everyone happy."

I wanted to move forward with the others. Even if there were occasionally rough patches, like our last match, my hope was that we'd all keep charging through together because we were all friends.

"Issei, I'm glad to have you in my Familia... Stay with me, forever."

"Of course, Prez! I'll always be by your side!"

It warmed my heart to see her beaming with such joy.

Knock-knock.

All of a sudden, there was a rapping at my door.

"Come in," I called out, only for an old man who I had never seen before to step inside. He was wearing a large hat over his head and looked to have lost one eye. On top of that, he had a long, white, flowing beard.

"Who are you, Gramps?" I asked uncertainly.

“I’m the Old Man of the North. It looks like you need to train a little harder, Red Dragon Emperor. None can say you lack dedication, though.”

Why was this geezer acting so familiar all of a sudden? And how did he know I was the Red Dragon Emperor?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Odin. I’m Rias Gremory.”

The prez seemed to recognize him. Odin? I felt like I had heard that name somewhere once before...

“Hmm, yes. Sirzechs’s little sister. I had my eye on you during the match. You’re a determined one, too, I see. Yes... Hmm... They really *are* big. I was transfixed by them the whole time.”

The old man was staring lecherously at the prez’s breasts!

Heeeey! You wrinkly bastard! Those tits are mine! No one else is allowed to look at them like that!

Just as I was about to protest, a beautiful armored woman who had entered the room without my realizing it hit Odin over the head with a paper fan.

“Argh! How many times have I told you? That obscene look of yours is unacceptable! We’re about to have an important meeting, so as the chief god of the Norse, pull yourself together!”

“...You never miss a beat, do you, Valkyrie? There’s no need to remind me... I’m supposed to be discussing terrorism countermeasures with the angels, demons, fallen angels, Zeus from the Greek pantheon, and Indra of Mount Sumeru, you see,” the old man muttered, scratching his head before glancing back at Rias and me. “Well, that’s enough of that. Sister of Sirzechs, Red Dragon Emperor. The world is full of trials and tribulations, but there’s a lot to enjoy out there, too. Experience everything it has to offer, pleasures and pains alike. Daring and impetuosity are how striplings grow. Oh-ho-ho.”

With those parting words, the geezer and the young armored lady left the room.

Just who was that old-timer...? He’d stared at the prez’s breasts! Anyone who tried to make a move on those boobs was my enemy, period! I wouldn’t let it

happen!

I asked the prez about him again afterward, only to be told he was apparently a Norse god! To me, he had seemed like nothing more than a lecherous codger!

There were still a lot of things I had yet to learn about this world.

Reunion

It was late August. We members of Rias Gremory's Familia were being seen off at the train station by Rias's family and servants from the main Gremory estate.

"Issei, I look forward to meeting you again," the prez's father said, a group of attendants standing behind him. "Feel free to visit at any time. It would please me greatly if you thought of us as your own family."

"Thank you! B-but I don't know if I deserve all that...," I replied with a forced smile.

"There's no need to be so modest, Issei," the prez's mother insisted. "Please look after Rias in the human world. My daughter has a strong selfish streak and is always making us worry."

"M-Mother! What are you saying?!" The prez's face turned scarlet. She was so cute!

"I will! Of course!" I nodded, beating my chest proudly.

I would take care of the prez! It might not have been the most discrete thing to say aloud, but I would guard the woman I loved with all my heart!

"...Ah, look at me getting all teary. Our family has a bright future ahead..."

Rias's father was crying. Where had that come from?!

At his side, Venelana let out a sigh. "Hold on, dear. At times like this, don't fathers normally refuse to give their daughters away so soon?"

"That's easy enough to say, but Issei here seems to have already surpassed me in terms of strength and power, so I've been thinking that it might be about time to settle down."

“At least wait until Rias has graduated from high school before talking about retirement.”

The prez’s father sounded like he was excited about something, but what, exactly?

“Rias, do at least send us a postcard before the end of your summer break,” Sirzechs requested, holding his son, Millicas, in his arms and with Grayfia standing behind him.

“I will. Stay well, Millicas.”

“You too, Auntie Rias!”

With that, we boarded the train and bid our final farewells from the window.

Ah...

At that moment, I suddenly realized that Sirzechs, Millicas, and one other person beside the two had a certain look about them.

Staring down at the three of them, I thought they resembled a typical family portrait. Maybe Sirzechs hadn’t been joking that time when he’d met my parents...



On the train ride home, I was racking my brain over my untouched homework.

I’d been so busy here in the underworld that I’d completely forgotten all about it!

Then I suddenly realized I’d spent the better part of my summer vacation trapped on a mountaintop with a dragon! I felt like bawling my eyes out!

My precious youth had been wasted in a game of survival. I hadn’t gone on a date with the prez or gotten up to any erotic amusements with Akeno!

I couldn’t help but weep as I scribbled away at my school assignments.

But at least I’d had some incredible experiences in the underworld. And I had certainly learned a lot.

The Gremory Familia had raw power to spare, yet without intelligent tactics,

we were liable to get killed by a team with more discipline and control.

If I was going to participate in Rating Games as a King myself one day, I would have to start thinking seriously about strategy...

I mean, no matter how mighty the legendary dragon that dwelled inside me was, if I recklessly charged straight into my opponents' traps, I would get crushed! If that happened when I was a King, it spelled immediate loss! My immense strength should have clinched a victory, but Saji had bested me with his wit.

Abruptly, I felt concerned for the future. I decided to ask a question of the person sitting beside me.

"Prez?"

"What?"

"I've been acting pretty reckless trying to become a harem king. That's still my goal, and my feelings about that haven't changed... But Tannin said something to me. That I would be wasting my potential if that was my endgame. So I've given it a bit of thought. A normal harem won't do at all. I'm going to have to build an unbeatable one, the most enthralling harem in the world."



The prez initially looked surprised by this admission but soon gave a broad smile. “It looks like our summer training camp was a huge success, then. Meeting other demons here in the underworld seems to have opened your eyes a little. Hopefully, this experience will help us both grow and move forward.”

Yep! I would give it my all!

All of a sudden, Koneko appeared out of nowhere and sat herself down on my lap?!

I had no idea what was going on, but she curled herself up on my knees, staring up at me as her cat ears twitched.

“K-Koneko...?” I asked timidly.

“*Meow*,” she answered, beaming.

Whoa. That was enough by itself to completely overload my brain.

Asia looked to be sulking, the prez was watching, half scowling, and while Akeno was outwardly smiling, I could feel an intense pressure coming from her...

There was danger all around, but I couldn’t deny Koneko! Cuteness is justice!

Things remained that way as the train passed back into the human realm.

Life in the underworld had been fun. This was a summer vacation I would never forget.

I stretched my muscles as I disembarked at the underground platform beneath the train station in my hometown.

“Ah, we’re finally here. All right then, let’s go home, Asia—”

However, when I turned to look at her, I found that a mysterious man with a gentle appearance had approached her.

“Asia Argento... We finally meet.”

“U-um...” Asia looked confused.

This was bad! Was that guy some sort of pervert? A groper? I wouldn’t let him lay a finger on my blond angel!

“Hey, hey, hey! What do you want with Asia?!” I demanded, putting myself between the two of them.

Curiously, the man’s eyes were filled with sincerity. “...So you’ve forgotten about me.”

Hold on... I’ve seen this guy somewhere before...

All of a sudden, he opened his shirt, revealing a massive scar on his chest, the remains of some deep wound.

Asia’s eyes widened in surprise. “That mark... Could it be...?”

Perhaps she recognized him now?

“Yes. I couldn’t show my face back then, but I was the demon you saved.”

“—.” Asia was rendered speechless by this announcement.

“My name is Diodora Astaroth. While your healing abilities weren’t potent enough to remove the scar at the time, your Sacred Gear unquestionably saved my life.”

Asia had told me about her past once before. After randomly encountering a demon and saving their life, she had been driven out of her order and branded a witch by the Church.

“Diodora? Diodora, right?” The prez looked like she recognized this man, too.

Ah! Now I remember! I thought. He’d been at the Demon Youth Social! The handsome, young high-class demon! He was from the family of the current Beelzebub!

At that moment, Diodora dropped to one knee, took Asia’s hand in his own, and kissed it!

Th-that bastard! What does he think he’s doing?!

I would have lunged toward him, but his eyes were fixed on Asia as he continued, “I came to meet you, Asia. Forgive me for not having been able to greet you during the gathering. I’m sure it was fate that brought us together... I would like nothing more than for you to marry me. I love you.”

Before my very eyes, Diodora popped the question to Asia.

Although the sweltering summer days were coming to an end, it looked like a long autumn was on the horizon.

AFTERWORD

If *High School DxD* gets a media adaptation, I'd like to have a go at making a bunch of character songs sung by each of our heroines' breasts.

The tsundere figure my readers have been clamoring for finally makes its entrance (in the form of Asia's boobs, that is).

Long time no see. Ishibumi here. It looks like I've gone and done it again.

Frankly, I'm amazed by just how much a story that seemingly revolves entirely around breasts can keep on giving.

We've reached the point where our protagonist, Issei, can enter a state like a Super Saiyan or a Bankai transformation simply by poking boobs. Still, I suppose he did almost lose his mind at the thought of Rias Gremory's breasts being halved a short while back, didn't he?

As for his Boob-Lingual technique... I must be sick, thinking that up.

Volume 5 is the longest in the series thus far, and this afterword is no different. It's given me a good amount of room to discuss things, so be warned, there will be spoilers ahead. If you haven't already, please finish the story first.

New Characters and the Underworld

Now then, the new characters this time around are the monster dragon Tannin and the top demon youth, Sairaorg. I'm planning for them to have more prominent roles in the future, so I hope you're looking forward to seeing more of those two.

We also learned more about Vali's friends and allies. We met Koneko's sister, Kuroka, and a mysterious Holy Sword wielder. I wonder who else is out there? Ah, but that's a question for another day.

There was also much more worldbuilding than the previous volume. I hadn't

yet spent much time describing demon social circles, so I decided to focus on that a bit. The peace agreement between the three great powers from last time served to lay the groundwork for the conflict between Rias Gremory's Familia and Team Vali, as well as Rating Games with other up-and-coming young demons.

My hope is to keep focusing on these areas from here on out while exploring the setting more and more.

That said, this is ultimately a romantic comedy centered around Issei, Rias, and all the others. It's about their school lives and growth as individuals.

Designing the underworld proved to be quite a challenge. This series is a modern-day fantasy set in contemporary Japan, so designing a completely different environment for the underworld wasn't an easy task.

Koneko and the Other Club Members

I had been discussing the idea of making Koneko a *nekomata* with my editor from the very beginning of the series. We never had a chance to really explore that facet of her until now. It took us a full year to reveal her true identity, but I'm glad the veil has finally been lifted.

At last, we've learned the backstories of each member of the Occult Research Club. Now it's time for us to see how they all mature. Each still has some baggage, but I'm hoping that, together with Issei, they can all overcome their pasts.

Whenever I write about the Occult Research Club, I have this strange habit of doing things in pairs. For example, Rias and Akeno are a sort of sisterly duo. Since Volume 4, the two have been at odds, as I've given them a very sibling-like relationship as they quarrel over Issei.

Asia has become a duo of sorts with Xenovia. They may have started off on the wrong foot, but now they're both firm friends. I wanted to introduce someone close with Asia, so it seemed reasonable to me for a pair of former members of the Church to strike up a good rapport.

Koneko's partner is Gasper, or Gaspy, as she affectionately calls him. One is a

sharp-tongued petite figure, while the other is a cross-dressing social recluse, but they're both cute little first-year students, so I hope you will all come to love them as much as I do.

The final combination is our male duo, Issei and Kiba. Throughout the story, we keep seeing Kiba tease Issei.

No matter how you look at it, Kiba is the team's ace. In terms of the number of enemies taken down, he has to be right up there at the top. Issei is the protagonist, so you can be sure that he'll inevitably get stronger in the future, too. I wanted Kiba to be a similarly powerful fighter who could help watch Issei's back. Speaking personally, I'd like for him to be a sort of shadow protagonist, following after Issei and Rias. In any event, he's an easy character to write when it comes to battles.

Last up is Azazel, the team's instructor. He's finally had a chance to show off his teaching skills, schooling the club members in various battle styles that none of them had ever considered before. He might not have engaged in any combat himself this time, but I hope he's still managed to earn himself a fair number of fans.

You may be wondering what's going to happen with Rias's final Rook piece, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait and see. I'm sure it will be put to use within the following year.

Here's something you might not have realized about this volume: If you remove the dust jacket, you can get a full view of Koneko's...

Rating Games

The focus of Volume 5 is on Koneko and Saji. I was incredibly excited about this one because I've been looking forward to this battle since the moment I first introduced Saji. I wanted Issei to lose at least once to a more clever opponent, and I thought only Saji fit that role.

I also wanted to put Issei through a bit of an ordeal in the same book where he unlocked his Balance Breaker. I'm a cruel author, aren't I?

There are many prodigy characters in this series, but I wanted to showcase

those who are especially hardworking. Issei and Saji fall into that category. I didn't want to give the impression that you need to have inborn talent to achieve greatness. I've always believed that hard work deserves to be rewarded. That's the underlying theme of this volume.

I'm the sort who likes to think about battlefields and strategies, yet because this is a romantic comedy, I couldn't toss everyone into the heat of a Rating Game right away. Thus, I decided to wait until I had developed the characters and the world a bit first. There are still many matches to look forward to in the future.

By the way, did you notice? The members who got retired this time were the opposite of those in the match against Riser Phenex's Familia.

Announcements

I know it's a little late, but I have an announcement. I've started contributing a series of short stories to *Dragon Magazine*, starting with the November issue!

Earlier, there was a super-brief tale in the September issue, along with a sexy poster featuring all the female members of the Occult Research Club in their swimsuits. Sorry for not giving you all more notice.

Those readers who only read the main series installments probably aren't familiar with what happens in the short stories, but in case you were wondering, they're mostly filled with gags and erotic encounters.

I'm not sure when we'll be collecting them all into a stand-alone book, so if you're interested, do take a look at the magazine.

To My Readers

Thank you all for your continued support! It's thanks to you that the series is doing so well. It looks like we'll be able to keep going for a while yet. I'm hoping to reach at least ten volumes!

I've also received a lot of your fan letters! With the release of the fourth volume, there have been many questions and opinions about Akeno. I wonder how many people fell in love with her after reading that? I've also enjoyed

writing her character since then, too. Do keep an eye out for more erotic sisterly moments in the future. Of course, Asia and Koneko will take more active roles going forward as well.

About Me

I have you all to thank for keeping me busy day after day. I'm in rehabilitation for my hip, which I fractured last spring, but fortunately, it's improving. Health comes first. I've also started drinking *aojiru* green juice.

Acknowledgments and the Next Volume

My thanks go out to Miyama-Zero and my editor H for helping me reach the five-volume mark.

Whenever I speak with my editor over the phone, it's always breasts this and breasts that. Even when we went to a *yakiniku* restaurant together, we ended up talking at length about boobs with each other.

We had to make a lot of corrections to Akeno's finger-sucking scene in Volume 3, and I also had to tidy up her scene in Volume 4 as well. It looks like I've finally got the hang of it this time around, as we didn't need to change anything for Volume 5.

Actually, I wanted to have Issei level up by sucking on Rias's breasts, but if I did that, Fujimi Fantasia Bunko wouldn't have been able to publish it, so I had to resort to poking instead.

Believe it or not, it was my editor who came up with the crazy suggestion of adding erotic moments into the battle scenes back in Volume 2. I agreed, thus I added the part where Issei sends his female opponents' clothes flying off. I was sure it would be rejected, but instead, my editor was ecstatic!

"This is it, this right here!" he said, giving me the okay. That's the story behind how Issei's Dress Break ability came to be, and it proved to be particularly popular among readers. So rest assured, both author and editor have raunchy minds.

Hmm. It looks like I've found myself talking about breasts again... Seriously,

what is it with this work?

We can't forget Miyama-Zero's work. I'm very sorry about all the absurd scenes and characters who keep popping up in every volume. I'm always moved by how incredible your illustrations are. All the color and black-and-white images are so perfect that every time I look at them, I find myself shaking in excitement. Amazing! Readers, please take a look at the short stories. Miyama-Zero's illustrations alone make them worth it. One is of Rias as a child, and there's another of a seductive *yuki-onna*, so I'm sure you'll love them!

The illustration of Issei and Vali in their armor for Volume 4 was incredible. I was so happy to see that Miyama-Zero had drawn the transformation scene that I found myself unconsciously clenching my fists in triumph.

It goes without saying, but *High School DxD* is a collaborative project. It's thanks to Miyama-Zero and my editor that we've been able to come this far.

Yet, as much as we've progressed, there's still a long way to go, so thanks again for your continued support!

The next volume will be all about Asia. You can see that the ball has started rolling at the end of this one, but it's the sixth volume where things will become quite serious. We might spend longer in the second semester of school than we did in the first one, so I hope everyone's looking forward to it as much as I am!

Ichiei Ishibumi

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